

MICHAEL INNES

An Inspector Appleby Mystery



STOP PRESS



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About the Author



Michael Innes is the pseudonym of John Innes Mackintosh Stewart, who was born in Edinburgh in 1906. His father was Director of Education and as was fitting the young Stewart attended Edinburgh Academy before going up to Oriel, Oxford where he obtained a first class degree in English.

After a short interlude travelling with AJP Taylor in Austria, he embarked on an edition of *Florio's* translation of *Montaigne's Essays* and also took up a post teaching English at Leeds University.

By 1935 he was married, Professor of English at the University of Adelaide in Australia, and had completed his first detective novel, *Death at the President's Lodging*. This was an immediate success and part of a long running series centred on his character Inspector Appleby. A second novel, *Hamlet Revenge*, soon followed and overall he managed over fifty under the Innes banner during his career.

After returning to the UK in 1946 he took up a post with Queen's University, Belfast before finally settling as Tutor in English at Christ

Church, Oxford. His writing continued and he published a series of novels under his own name, along with short stories and some major academic contributions, including a major section on modern writers for the *Oxford History of English Literature*.

Whilst not wanting to leave his beloved Oxford permanently, he managed to fit in to his busy schedule a visiting Professorship at the University of Washington and was also honoured by other Universities in the UK.

His wife Margaret, whom he had met and married whilst at Leeds in 1932, had practised medicine in Australia and later in Oxford, died in 1979. They had five children, one of whom (Angus) is also a writer. Stewart himself died in November 1994 in a nursing home in Surrey.

Prologue

The Spider began his career as a common criminal. Or perhaps as almost a common criminal, for it is arguable that from the first the scale of his operations lifted him slightly out of the rut. He did little practical work himself and into the normal haunts of his kind – pot-houses, thieves' kitchens, shady pawnshops – he was never recorded to have strayed. He lived, much as a morally blameless *rentier* might live, in a largish house in the country, with an establishment running to a butler, two footmen, and a secretary. The secretary it is true was blind, which is unusual and slightly sinister in secretaries: the tap-tap of his stick as he went about his employer's confidential commissions was one of the most effective strokes in the *décor* of the Spider. But the servants were wholly normal and wholly unsuspecting of their master's real profession. Sitting in a library of old books the Spider controlled from afar a nefarious organization of surprising complexity. This, presumably, is why he was called the Spider. He was fond of quoting from the poet Pope of whose tangled bibliography he had a connoisseur's knowledge – and to unruly lieutenants he would point out in a coldly terrifying way that *his touch, infinitely fine, felt at each thread and lived along the line*. He kept a private wireless transmitter concealed in a cocktail cabinet.

About halfway through his career the Spider underwent a change of character. Hitherto businesslike and almost conscientiously diabolical, he now became intermittently chivalrous. More than once he was known to free

a beautiful girl from the embraces of a brutalized accomplice and deliver her unscathed to an opponent – an opponent who, although boneheaded, was bronzed, gentlemanlike, and himself much too chivalrous to enlist against the Spider's organization the prosaic assistance of the police. About the same time the Spider developed a philosophy of property. He would compare himself now to Robin Hood and now to the oil and steel kings of the United States. He took from the rich and gave to such people and causes as a really wise and nice man would give to. This went on for some years.

Then came a further change. It seems to have been the result of a confused period of gang-warfare in the course of which the Spider acquired a machine-gun and an armoured car. They proved unsuccessful investments – England was too small for them – and for a time the Spider appeared to be getting nowhere. This check precipitated the crisis. There is no record of it, but the struggle was doubtless severe. The Spider emerged with moral perceptions which were wholly orthodox. His passion for the perpetration of crime became a passion for its detection. His old way of life ceased to exist except in so far as it gave him useful insight into the minds of his new quarry. The rich now came to him fearlessly and he solved their strangest perplexities with unfailing success. Those who had not known him for long wondered why he was called the Spider at all, and one or two who had read Swift thought he might better have been called the Bee. He was no wholly on the side of sweetness and light.

He began to keep bees. He improved himself in the art of music and became a finished executant

on the clarinet. And in other ways his domestic life was modified. His house, though still in the country, was smaller. The books were even more in evidence and to Pope had been added Shakespeare, Wordsworth, St John of the Cross, Hegel, Emerson, and Donne. The Spider had grown remarkably literary: sometimes more literary than anything else. The wireless transmitter had disappeared. In its place the Spider had found a bosom friend, a retired engineer who accompanied him everywhere and wrote down everything he said, always without any inconvenient penetration into why he was saying it. But the engineer, though not clever, was literary too. He had the Spider were never so hot on a trail that they would not stop to bandy a little poetry by the way. The poetry was delightful in itself. And it served to distinguish the Spider in what was becoming a seriously overcrowded profession.

Mr Richard Eliot, the creator of the Spider, had not meant to do it. Or not as much of it as he eventually found himself doing. The first Spider story, he would say in that allusive literary way which was growing on him, had come into the world with the same apology as the baby in *Mr Midshipman Easy*: it was only a very little one. And, curiously enough, it had been the product of unnecessary fastidiousness.

Some twenty years before this chronicle opens Mr Eliot had inherited a largish house in the country and here he lived as any morally blameless *rentier* might live. He superintended unremunerative agricultural operations in an amateurish but competent way. Occasionally he ran up to town for the opera, the exhibitions of

the Royal Academy, interviews with his stockbroker, and the Eton and Harrow match. It was the Eton and Harrow match of 1919 that was critical in his history.

This match took place three days after the birth of Mr Eliot's second child. For the first time Mr Eliot entered his club in St James's as the father of a son. And he there found a number of his contemporaries who were already the fathers of Etonians and Harrovians – for Mr Eliot had married somewhat late in life. It at once became clear to Mr Eliot that Timothy must go to Eton. The decision was, it has been hinted, unnecessarily fastidious, for the education of a gentleman may be received at a number of less expensive schools. But every Englishman will understand Mr Eliot's processes of mind.

Mr Eliot, then, put the infant Timothy down for Eton and went home to count the cost. It promised to be considerable: moreover there was the possibility of further sons being born to him, and it would hardly be fair to send Timothy to Eton and his younger brothers to lesser schools. And this was the point at which Mr Eliot remembered that he was by way of being a literary man. Years before, and during his short service in the Indian army, he had printed a couple of sketches in a regimental magazine. His friends had liked them and he had been encouraged to send a short story, full of careful local colour and the correct reactions to physical danger, to a London editor. The story was published; others succeeded it; and in those severely unillustrated magazines that lie about in clubs for the recreation of the elderly, Mr Eliot's name was for a time frequently to be remarked. But when he retired to the English countryside he

dropped this habit of authorship. He was no longer in contact with the tigers and fakirs he had been in the way of writing of, and he found that he remembered surprisingly little about them. Moreover he was becoming rather too bookish greatly to enjoy writing; he had a fondness for Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and others of whom there is singularly little to be said. On his favourite poet Pope he became quite an authority; and he sometimes dared to wonder if there might not be room for a monograph, of an unassumingly scholarly sort, to be called 'Pope's Use of the Terms *Nature*, *Reason*, and *Common Sense*: a Study in Denotation and Connotation.' Rough notes for this *opusculum*, together with a neatly typed title-page, lay about on Mr Eliot's desk for years.

That Mr Eliot, thus circumstanced and thus inclined, should have invented the Spider in order to provide schooling for his son is something on which he himself probably came to look back with a good deal of perplexity. Partly it was due to that realistic turn of mind which made him a tolerably competent gentleman farmer. A sum of money was required; literature might provide it; so Mr Eliot sat down and read Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography*, that textbook of the economics of authorship. He then reflected on the numbers of people who read old-established magazines in quiet clubs and compared them with the numbers of people who have to read what is readily readable in noisy tubes and buses. From these reflections emerged the Spider.

But there was more to it than this. Had the Spider been merely an economic expedient Mr Eliot, who was not venal, would never have called him forth from the night of his forebeing. The

truth is that to his realism Mr Eliot united a restless fancy, and to his mature if rather ineffective literary culture a juvenile taste for vicarious romantic adventure. In devising the highly improbable adventures of the Spider he was weaving his own magic carpet. At the outset nobody enjoyed these adventures more keenly than their inventor. His imagination was of the refrigerating sort from which the fantasies of boyhood can step with convincing freshness; and it was this quality, no doubt, that made the stories the instant and almost embarrassing success that they were. Nor at first was Mr Eliot's bookishness a handicap. Rather it helped him to a useful critical control of the magic carpet, so that his contraptions of the sort flow straighter and cleaner than most. And it gave him from the start a good deal of craft. He had pondered *Gulliver's Travels* and knew that the best way to pass off an improbability is to set another improbability hard up against it. He knew that literature is naturally divided into 'kinds', which the writer mixes at his peril. The early Spiders kept carefully within their own 'kind'.

And they were a success. A fatal moment came when Mr Eliot ought to have stopped – and didn't. After that there was no stopping. An adjoining estate came into the market and he bought it. It ate money. So did various indigent relations, including a couple of disreputable cousins whom the good news brought hurrying home from the colonies. And soon on the continued activities of the Spider a score of remoter livelihoods came to hang. There was the old lady who dramatized and the young man who did the films; there was the American agent who had contrived to marry Mr Eliot's niece; there was the little staff at Mr Eliot's publishers which ran

the absurd and irritatingly successful Spider Club; there was an amusing Jew who called himself Helmuth somebody and did translations into German, and there was the same Jew calling himself André something else and doing translations into French. For a time there were even three young women in Chelsea who proposed to paint the Spider, together with Sherlock Holmes and kindred notabilities, on crockery designed for the modern home – but at this Mr Eliot rebelled, and by buying back these particular ‘rights’ for an exorbitant sum nipped the nascent industry in the bud.

For years, then, the Spider contributed to the gaiety of nations. But Mr Eliot, who had been brought up to believe that life should be earnest as well as gay and sober as well as fantastic, became more and more uneasy at the increasing demands which the Spider made upon his energies. For months on end he was obliged to submerge himself wholly amid such absurdities and improbabilities as are agreeable to a well-balanced man only on an occasional lazy evening by the fire. It was rather like living out one’s span of days in a cinema or through an unintermitted succession of dramas. And whenever he proposed to emerge or wake up he knew that the old lady who dramatized and all the other servants whom the Spider had gathered about himself trembled for their bread – or at least for their cake. Mr Eliot, who was kind-hearted, liked to think that there was cake all round; in a way it made up for his disappointment over Timothy. For Timothy had not gone to Eton after all. A precocious interest in educational theory, coupled with an equally precocious strength of will, had taken him to a modest co-educational school such as his father might very well have afforded without once

setting pen to paper. So Mr Eliot had to comfort himself with the thought that his activities brought unexpected prosperity to a number of indifferently deserving people. But he came, it was believed, to feel positively uncomfortable about his creation.

The decidedly protean character of the Spider was no doubt due to this uncomfortableness. There would come a point at which Mr Eliot could no longer contemplate the Spider as he was – whereupon there had to be a change. These changes, each of which had thrown Mr Eliot's publishers into a sub-acute agony, were by a strange fatality always overwhelmingly successful. Kindly reviewers spoke of the progressively revealed complexity, the subtle maturing of the Spider's character, and when he finally came over wholeheartedly to the side of law and order his conversion was the subject of approving comment from more than one distinguished pulpit. Mr Eliot himself, as the Spider pursued malefactors dramatically about the globe, had for a time the illusory sense of being the henchman of a sort of cosmic police.

Novelists have often recorded the almost uncanny way in which their everyday life has come to be influenced by their own creations. The beings of a writer's imagination are said to throng and press about him and even to impose for a time their own fictitious personalities upon the real personality of their creator. And it may be supposed that when a writer makes of a single character a companion for life and experiences in his company a series of adventures terminable only by death he may come to be haunted by this single dominating creation in an extraordinary way. Perhaps this happened to Mr Eliot. It is

certain that in the Spider's final phase the Spider and Mr Eliot became a little mixed up. There was a disconcerting novel in which a good deal turned upon the Spider's habit – hitherto unknown to his admirers – of writing stories about tigers and fakirs. And there was an increasing element not only of literary allusiveness in the badinage between the Spider and his friend the engineer but of realistic and unromantic matter on the problems of English land-owners and the condition of English rural society. Against these hazardous trends more than one interested party held complicated and costly insurance policies.

More and more, in fact, Mr Eliot and his interests seemed to be creeping into the world of the Spider. Was the Spider, the curious speculated, creeping correspondingly into the world of Mr Eliot? Mr Eliot's own opinions were unknown. Probably he was undisturbed; it is noteworthy that none of his acquaintances had thought of him as a nervously unbalanced man. Nevertheless his acquaintances, observing that he no longer came up for the Royal Academy or even the Eton and Harrow match, suspected that all was not well with him; a few believed that he had conceived for the wearisome Spider something not unlike a mild obsessive hatred.

This was the situation when the thing happened.

PART ONE

Rust Hall

It was a November evening in Oxford and the air was stagnant, raw, and insidiously chill. Vapours – half-hearted ghosts on the verge of visibility – played desultory acoustic tricks about the city, like bored technicians flicking to and fro the sound screens in a radio studio. A wafer of eaten stone, loosened by a last infinitesimal charge of condensing acid, would slither to the ground with disconcerting resonance. The masons' mallets, making good in random patches centuries of such mellow decay, tapped like so many tiny typewriters in an engulfing silence. The sky, a sheet of lead rapidly oxidizing, was fading through glaucous tones to cinereous; lights were furred about their edges; in the gathering twilight Gothic and Tudor, Palladian and Venetian melted into an architecture of dreams. And the hovering vapours, as if taking heart of darkness, glided in increasing concentration by walls and buttresses – like the first inheritors of the place, robed and cowled, returning to take possession with the night.

'Webster!'

The young man who had turned so abruptly out of the porter's lodge ignored the call. He had an athletic figure of the slimmer sort, disproportionately attired. Round his neck were accumulated a sweater, a towel, a blazer, and a large muffler; below this level he wore nothing but a pair of shoes, and diminutive shorts cut in

the faith that the squatting position is the only one known to man. This peg-top appearance is common in those who have just come off the river, and there was nothing out of the way about the young man except the haste which had suddenly possessed him. As if the ghosts had verily appeared to him, he ran. Ignoring another friend's call, he charged across the college lawn – a route which would have cost him five shillings had a traditionally minded don observed him – tripped over the college tortoise, recovered, skilfully swerved round an advancing tray of crumpets and anchovy-toast, dodged through a narrow archway and pounded up a dark and ancient staircase. A dim person, whom the youth hailed as Webster had long believed to be a kitchen-man but who was in point of fact the Regius Professor of Eschatology, stood politely aside to let him pass; he took the last treads at a bound, thumped at a door, pitched himself precipitately through it, and collapsed into a wickerwork chair – a chair, like his shorts, moulded to a theory: this time that man sits not, but either curls or sprawls.

Gerald Winter, the don who owned the room, surveyed his panting visitor, enunciated with simple irony the words, 'Come in', and helped himself to a muffin from a dish by the fire. Then, resigning himself to the exercise of hospitality, he said, 'Muffin.'

The young man took half a muffin. Presently he scrambled up the back of the chair and reached himself a cup and saucer. 'I'm frightfully sorry', he murmured conventionally as he poured out tea, 'to burst in.' He jumped up and foraged three lumps of sugar. One he ate and the others he dropped with a splash in his cup. And then he sat

down again, looked warily at his host and fidgeted. 'Frightfully sorry,' he repeated inanely and vaguely. He was a young man with a firm mouth and a resolute chin.

Winter made a movement after the kettle that concealed a scrutiny of his guest. 'My good Timmy,' he said – for it was only Timothy Eliot's closest friends who were privileged to call him Webster; and Winter, who was merely his tutor, was not of this degree of intimacy – 'My good Timmy, not at all.' He began to fill his pipe, which was a ritual indicating a mood of sympathetic leisure. He was by no means attached to the role of confidential adviser to the young; nevertheless this job frequently fell to him. Troubles material and spiritual came regularly up his staircase, sometimes at a resistless bound, sometimes with the most dubious pauses landing by landing. The Professor of Eschatology had formed the conclusion that Winter was a sinisterly sociable person. Actually Winter was rather shy and when he heard these characteristic approaches he frequently took refuge on the roof. But Timothy Eliot had caught him and now he said briefly: 'What's wrong?'

'It's the Spider.'

Winter looked gloomy. If there was anything tedious about Timmy it was a chronic sensitiveness about this harmless invention of his father's. Since coming up to Oxford Timmy had been constrained to endure a good deal of fun about the Spider, for it is a characteristic of undergraduates to revive kinds of humour in abeyance since they left their private schools. There was, for instance, the amusement of addressing Timmy out of what was called Webster's Dictionary: which meant weaving into

conversation – if possible undetected – phrases from the earlier and more picturesque conversation of Mr Eliot's hero. And there was the solemn assumption that Timmy himself was the author of the books, this being an ingenious way of avoiding the impropriety of making direct fun of a man's parent. The jokes about Webster Eliot were judiciously intermittent – to harp on them would have been boorish – but Timmy, while playing up to them amiably enough, was reputed at times to brood over the curious family industry which was the occasion of them. So now Winter sighed and said dryly: 'Oh, that.' He felt that he was unlikely to be helpful about the Spider.

But Timmy shook his head. 'It's not', he said, 'just the old quiet fun. It's something queer at home. Something – well – that seems to be happening to daddy.'

To Winter Mr Eliot the elder was not much more than a name and an odd reputation. He thought it sufficient therefore to indicate conventional concern. 'Happening?' he murmured.

'Doomed to the bin.'

'Doomed to the bin – the Spider? You mean he's being scrapped?'

'Not the Spider, daddy. And I mean he seems to be going gently off his rocker. Taking something to heart. I don't know quite what to do about it. Awkward thing in a family. *I* thought you might think of something.' And Timmy, with a fragment of muffin he had reserved for the purpose, began mopping up the surplus butter in the muffin dish. He did it in jabs that echoed the jerky sentences.

There was a little silence. A bus rumbled down the High and Winter's windows rattled angrily; from the quad below floated up the voices of hearty men discussing a football practice. Winter straightened himself, feeling that somnolence was no longer decent. 'The facts,' he said.

'Very simple. He thinks the Spider has come alive.'

'Come alive?' Experience with undergraduate predicaments did not prevent Winter feeling uncomfortable.

'Just that. Pygmalion and Galatea situation. The beloved marble stirs and lives. Only daddy doesn't greatly love the Spider.'

Winter looked at his pupil suspiciously. 'What – if anything – has actually happened?'

'A joke – put across by some precious ass on daddy. And it's been too dam' successful.' Timmy pushed the empty muffin dish away ungratefully. 'Doomed to the bin,' he repeated and seemed to find comfort in this succinct statement of the worst.

'Surely it's not as bad as all that. Whatever the joke may have been, your father will presumably forget about it in time.'

'You haven't got the idea. The joke's still going on.'

'Oh!' Winter looked disconcerted.

'It's quite a tale – and goes back some months. I expect you know how a person in daddy's situation may be pestered. He's read by hundreds of thousands of people, and that means by hundreds of mild pests. There are always a few badgering him. They're being poisoned by their wives or shut up as mad by their uncles or

systematically persecuted by the Prime Minister or the Archbishop of Canterbury. In the old days they sometimes complained that the Spider was after them with a gun. You can imagine all that.'

'Effortlessly.' Fellows of Oxford colleges, Winter was thinking, are seldom subjected to such paranoiac importunities and would be uncommonly worried if they were. 'I gather you've even been badgered a bit yourself.'

'Oh, that. It was a bit bad at my prepper. They called me Miss Muffet. That was worse, somehow, than Webster. I've never minded much since, really. Do you know that at Balliol there's a man whose father is the world's biggest manufacturer of—'

'No doubt. But to your tale.'

'Well, it's characteristic of these badgerers that they fade out. I suppose when they get no change they turn to badgering someone else. That's one thing that makes the present badgerer unique: tenacity. And there's another. Daddy's had lots of messages and so on *about* the Spider as if he were a real person; he's never had any *from* the Spider as if he were a real person.'

'Surely it's an obvious enough joke? You don't mean to say' – there was decent anxiety in Winter's voice – 'that your father is seriously—'

'This badgerer', Timmy interrupted, 'knows too much. He has a sort of slogan: *The Spider Knows All*. And apparently it's more or less true.'

Winter looked up sharply. 'Timmy Eliot, don't talk nonsense.'

'It's not nonsense. It's the point of the whole thing. This badgerer knows what only the real Spider could know.'

'The *real* Spider?'

'Oh, dear, I *mean* the real Spider – the one in the books.'

Winter stirred uneasily in his chair. 'You are sure', he said, 'that you are not a badgerer yourself, trying to pull my leg? Or that you haven't been reading too hard?'

The young man opposite stretched himself in feline luxury in his rowing kit. 'Do I look', he asked, 'like a Grammarian's Funeral? And I'm really quite serious. This person pretending to be the Spider knows what only the real Spider could know.'

'Timmy, you're saying something meaningless. What you call the real Spider isn't a person with a brain and knowledge. He's a number of black marks printed on paper. This person *can't* know what only the Spider could know.'

'Prosaically true. But he knows, daddy says, things that the Spider of the books thought of doing, and didn't. In other words, he has a supernatural insight into daddy's mind.'

Another bus lumbered down the High and again the windows rattled as if in the clutch of an angry demon. Far away, muffled in the thickening air, a deep bell began to toll.

'It started', said Timmy, 'in the long vac. With the perpetration of a very elaborate joke. The person chiefly concerned is a Mrs Birdwire, and first I must tell you about her.'

'I seem to have heard of her. A traveller, isn't she?'

'Yes. Only you mustn't call her that: she doesn't like it. The explorer. Mrs Birdwire the celebrated explorer. She's our nearest neighbour about a couple of miles off.'

Winter raised his eyebrows. 'I didn't know you were as isolated as that.'

'Not our nearest local neighbour; our nearest county neighbour. Mrs Birdwire is the nearest polite society we have – she's incredible vulgar, by the way – and Mrs Birdwire was burgled by the Spider. It was all very difficult. You see, daddy and she have never got on.'

'Embarrassing.'

'Quite so. Mrs Birdwire was burgled and a lot of beastly trophies and curios and things taken, and the Spider left his celebrated signature: a large Spider cut out of black velvet. He left it in Mrs Birdwire's very own bath.'

'He always does that?'

Timmy blushed. 'Rather foul rot, isn't it? He used always to do something of the sort. Remember that the burglary was by the Spider of very long ago; he's been doing nothing but detective stuff for years now. He had a bad throwback, so to speak, and burgled Mrs Birdwire. He also insulted her. You must know that there's supposed to be a Mr Birdwire, though nobody has ever seen him. Mrs Birdwire's formula is that he's "cruelly tied to the city", and there's a joke to the effect that one day Mrs Birdwire may go exploring after him. Well, the Spider left a picture. It showed Mrs Birdwire in the fantastic tropical kit she's photographed in, cutting her way through a jungle of telephones and typewriters to a little man who was sitting at a desk necking with a secretary. And underneath

was written: "Mr Birdwire I presume?" Just like that.'

Winter gave a loud unacademic guffaw. 'Crude,' he said, 'unquestionably crude. But satisfactory nevertheless. Where was the picture?'

'Mrs Birdwire has built herself a house in an awful style she calls Spanish Mission – all white walls and little bogus wrought-iron grills. The Spider chose the biggest, whitest wall he could find and did his drawing rather more than life size in red paint. It was a place of pilgrimage from miles around for days.'

For a moment Winter closed his eyes as if the better to visualize this revolting manifesto. 'Timmy,' he said, 'you fascinate me. But let me say that your linguistic habits are appalling. Consistently to refer to this joker as "the Spider" is sheer encouragement to the confusion of mind which you say has overtaken your father.'

'It seems convenient. Actually, I ought to have spoken so far of Spider One.'

'Spider One?'

'The master-crook. You see no sooner was Mrs Birdwire burgled by Spider One than Spider Two – the super-detective of recent years – fell to and began clearing the matter up.'

'The dickens he did!'

'Spider Two – *daddy's* Spider Two – has a habit of reading newspaper reports of mysterious crimes and then sending the police vital hints which they'd otherwise have missed. Mrs Birdwire's Spider Two did just that. The red paint had been bone dry when the gardener discovered it early in the morning. The Spider wrote to the police and pointed out that the only ordinary

paint that would dry as quickly as that was some foreign stuff that was just beginning to be imported in small quantities. And sure enough that gave the police a line they'd missed. They traced a purchase of this stuff from a London warehouse by an unknown customer. This unknown had paid cash and asked that the stuff be delivered at some address in a suburb. It was duly delivered at an empty house and the unknown was there to receive it; he seems just to have commandeered an unoccupied house at random, breaking in at the back. No trace of him was ever found again. But Mrs Birdwire's curios and what-not were neatly arranged round the floor of the principal room. If Spider Two hadn't pointed out a valid detective process they would presumably never have been recovered. The thing, in fact, was a large, broad, pointless joke. Am I most frightfully boring you?'

'I repeat that I am fascinated. Your story opens vistas of bewilderment. May I remind you, however, that you have yet to explain--'

But Timmy Eliot had jumped up. 'And now', he said, 'will you come down?'

'Come down?'

'Home with me for the weekend to see if we can get to the bottom of the business. I expect you can work me an exeat from Benton. And dons are always weekendeng.'

Winter scrambled from his chair, genuinely perturbed. 'Young man, steady on! And will you tell me why you have suddenly come to me with all this in such a hurry?'

'Will you come down?'

'And just what warrant may there be for the fantastic statement that this joker knows things your father's precious character thought of doing, and didn't?'

Timmy grinned, as if conscious of the strength of his bait. 'That's the real beguilement, isn't it – how can a joker give the impression of peering into a writer's mind? Once more, will you come down?'

Close by the chapel bell began its urgent and perfunctory peal. Winter glanced at a calendar, dived for his surplice. 'Lord help me!' he cried in despair. 'I have to read Numbers xxxiii and I haven't looked up the pronunciations.' He turned to Timmy. 'To your bath. And if you breakfast with me at half past eight I'll make up my mind then.'

Left to himself, Winter gave a moment to the dubious contemplation of his fire. In Timmy Eliot's story there was a hint of matter sufficiently baffling to interest him; nevertheless he was inclined to call himself a fool for half-promising to investigate. He hurried downstairs with a mounting sense of his own rashness. In the quadrangle he ran into several of his colleagues and drew comfort from the thought that the adventure, should he undertake it, would afford a holiday from familiar faces.

As it happened, this was a miscalculation. A good many familiar faces were to take part in the comedy of the next few days: some of them were actually about him in the quadrangle now. And the comedy was to be of the classical sort which is based on character. But for Gerald Winter's rashness – but for a rashness which repeated itself almost within the hour – the history of a

celebrated writer of romances would have been wholly different.

After-dinner procedure in the senior common-room is dictated by Dr Groper. The little table, the middle-sized table, the big table, and the supernumerary table are his idea.

A distinguished mathematics and for long Master of the college, Dr Groper worked out his system during the anxious period when Oxford was awaiting the news of Waterloo. His dispositions have been respected ever since for the simple reason that he made a considerable endowment of the college cellar dependent on them. It is true that in the mid-nineteenth century a radically-minded Master, who was voraciously sociable and objected particularly to the little table, persuaded his colleagues to take legal advice. But learned counsel, after studying Dr Groper's will with the help of several Cambridge mathematicians, delivered the opinion that the system is rational, reasonable, and in no way repugnant to the public interest; in fact that if the system goes, half the cellar fund must go as well. The system has never been questioned since.

Dr Groper desired that an edifying time should be had by all, and by all equally; and to the realization of this proposition he dedicated his science. The after-dinner hour, he believed, is peculiarly propitious to those sudden starts of mind by which the boundaries of human knowledge are extended. Periodically, therefore, a scholar should have the opportunity of discussing his port in meditative seclusion. Hence the little table, which stands apart and furnished for one in a corner of the room; here every Fellow of the college must take his place in turn

and await such inspiration as may visit him. Next comes the middle-sized table, which is for three; here Dr Groper hoped for fruitful discussions of a sustained and serious sort. The big table is for seven, and at this conversation is naturally more general and fragmentary; Dr Groper mentioned in his will that he solicited innocent mirth. And this completes the normal arrangements. The college is small and these eleven places accommodate the Master and statutory number of Fellows. Their orderly progression night by night from table to table would be a simple affair but for the complication introduced by occasional guests. When such are present they are entertained at the supernumerary table by the Master, the Dean, and the Fellow who would normally sit fifth at the big table supposing – as is not the case – that no guests are ever entertained on Sunday. It is this last provision that makes the calculations a little complicated; it was instituted by Dr Groper as likely to maintain the standard of mathematical study in the college. And over the system's learnedly ordered convivialities the figure of Dr Groper still presides in the shape of a portrait by Raeburn. A puffy man in rusty clericals, he stands pointing with an incongruously military gesture at the open page of his own justly celebrated *Commentary on Newton's Principia*. Beside him rests a brilliantly rendered silver and brass orrery. A touch of that gesturing hand – it seems – would set planets and moons on their intricate dance about the sun. But Dr Groper's eye is outward over the common-room, as if controlling the scarcely less elaborate and secular gyrations which his will has imposed on generations of scholars unborn.

Into the familiar embraces of the Groper system came Gerald Winter and his colleagues

after hall. They had been obliged to walk across two quadrangles in a drizzling rain – for the life of dons is a sublime mixture of snugness and unnecessary inconvenience – and Winter watched with an abstracted eye the little huddle of gowns, umbrellas, and table-napkins sorting itself out in the porch. It was, he thought, rather like a congregation of magpies; of moulting magpies, he added – acknowledging to himself that he was in doubtful humour. In chapel Numbers xxxiii impromptu had not been a success. His delivery had been confident, even slightly bored. But Mummery, the Mods tutor and the acknowledged eccentric of the college, had taken it upon himself to utter a loud and scornful exclamation upon each mispronunciation in that grotesque catalogue of names – an effect the more pleasing to the assembled undergraduates in that Mummery's reactions appeared to issue involuntarily from deep sleep.

Winter was glad to see Mummery being directed to the little table. It was one of the horrors of Dr Groper's system that one never knew from evening to evening with whom one must consort. The suspicion was current that old Puxton, the mathematical tutor who had charge of the arrangements, had long since lost his grip of the necessary calculations and resorted to mere bluff; on one occasion when the Professor of Eschatology had been required to sit at the little table three nights running there had been quite a scene. Dons are in general a mildly gregarious sort of men, and nobody except Mummery relished Dr Groper's periodic seclusion. Mummery cheated. The little table, being a little table, was easily movable, and it was Mummery's habit to edge it within earshot of the middle-sized table. He was thus able, while seemingly in a

profound abstraction, to practise that trick of significant ejaculation which had been employing against Winter in chapel.

Winter, meditating in increasing irritation the riddle of the Spider's prescience, found himself directed to the middle-sized table along with the Master, Dr Bussenschutt. A moment later they were joined by Benton, the senior tutor from whom Timmy's exeat would have to be obtained. No arrangement, Winter reflected, could have been more dismal. Benton believed that Bussenschutt drank. Bussenschutt knew this. Bussenschutt affected to believe that Benton had an out-of-the-way vulgar accent, and he was in the habit of consulting undergraduates from remote parts of the country in an effort to identify it. This Benton knew. Bussenschutt had once overheard Benton say that Winter thought that Bussenschutt was the very type of the scholar who has never mastered his Latin grammar; and this had confirmed Bussenschutt in his conviction that Winter was, intellectually at the least, dishonest. Winter and Benton disliked each other, as a matter of mere instinct. And on mere instinct they both disliked Mummery, whose table was now levitating stealthily nearer. Mummery, in a moment of some little unrestraint, had once apostrophized Bussenschutt as a hoary-headed and toothless baboon and Bussenschutt, declaring that nothing could be more unacademic that such language, had preached a powerful sermon against Mummery on the text *The name of the wicked shall rot*. It was the business of all four men to work closely together on the production of a learned journal called *Comity*.

Bussenschutt sat down and eyed his companions with the greatest geniality. Then,

preserving the same expression he directed his glance to the decanter. 'Ah, the Smith Woodhouse late-bottled? A wine invariably brilliant on the table.' He poured out a glass. 'And the bouquet immense.'

'I deprecate', said Mummery loudly, and appearing to address Dr Groper over the fireplace, 'aroma in ports.'

Benton shifted his chair so as to have his back squarely to the little table. 'I wish', he said, 'we might see the Fonseca '96.' Benton was an anxious and nervous person, looking much before and after; his conversation was frequently despondingly optative. 'I do wish we might have the '96.'

Bussenschutt cracked a walnut. 'The Fonseca? We are to have it up for Founder's Day at the end of the month. By the way, I have had a letter from Jasper Shoon.'

'From Shoon, the armaments man?' said Winter. Winter's mind sometimes strayed to public issues.

'From Shoon, the collector?' said Benton. Benton always maintained the attitude of a pure scholar.

'Indeed, yes – Jasper Shoon. Winter, have I not heard you maintain that port is *not* a right wine?'

'The intellectual pleasure of drinking wine', said Winter with the distaste of one forced to reiterate a stale aphorism, 'is never fully yielded us by port. Shoon?'

Bussenschutt, without at all discomposing the geniality of his features, placed his lips in a whistling position and slowly mingled port and air. 'I would not deny', he said with irritating

deliberation, 'that a great claret is the true close to a meal.'

'If only', said Benton, 'they would learn to decant such clarets only when the dessert is being placed on the table. You were remarking that you had heard from Shoon.'

'To be sure – Shoon. You support me, my dear Benton, in the impression that the vintage ports are maturing more quickly than of old?'

Benton, distracted between alluring topics, turned his head nervously from side to side somewhat like the donkey between two carrots. 'Yes,' he said, 'I agree. And I wish we had laid down more 1917. And more 1920. We should feel much stronger.' He shook his head sadly. 'I wish I knew Shoon.'

'Shoon?' said Bussenschutt dubiously, as if the name had been mentioned for the first time. 'Oh, yes indeed. He has made a most interesting discovery. Winter, the decanter stands.'

Winter, his own thoughts divided between the Spider and this alien but beguiling topic with which Bussenschutt was toying, pushed along the port. At the little table Mummery was making a long-drawn whiffling noise – his habit when engaged in concentrated eavesdropping.

'Shoon', said Bussenschutt, 'has purchased a most remarkable papyrus.' He cracked another walnut. 'A document, my dear Winter, preserved on the ancient writing-material made from the stem of *Cyperus Papyrus*: you understand me?' It was one of Bussenschutt's most annoying tricks to affect momentary fits of abstraction during which he would address his colleagues as if they were junior undergraduates. He turned again to Benton. 'You say we are insufficiently provided

with 1917? A pity. It is a year that is already in very good condition.'

'And 1920,' said Benton.

From the little table came a sound as of the final moments of an emptying bath. Mummery was expressing impatience and indignation.

'1920?' murmured Bussenschutt, looking at Benton with a great appearance of bewilderment. 'Nay, my dear fellow: 407. I said 407.' Mummery's noises ceased abruptly. And in Winter's mind the Eliots retreated defeated.

'And with what,' said Bussenschutt, contriving to look round the table as if it were a little gathering in a lecture-room, 'do we associate the year 407 bc? Let me tell you: it is with the rebuilding of the Erechtheum. And now let me say a word on papyri in general.'

'Really, Master,' said Benton, 'this is an affectation in very poor taste. Both Winter and I are abundantly conversant with papyri in general. I wish—'

'As you are aware, our extant papyri, with the exception of those discovered at Herculaneum, all come from Egypt. But *this* papyrus comes from Athens. It seems to be nothing less than one of those two on which we know from an inscription that there was entered a fair-copy of the expenses involved in the rebuilding of the Erechtheum. Palaeographically, it is likely to be of quite outstanding importance.' Bussenschutt stretched out his hand for the decanter once more and abruptly ceased to address an imaginary class. 'A first-rate find,' he said. 'Nothing quite so important since your dammed Codex.'

And pronouncing the last words Dr Bussenschutt thrust his face into Benton's and deliberately made a noise of the most primitive and blood-curdling hatred. In expressiveness it could not have been bettered by Mummery himself.

Winter sighed – not unhappily. He was fond of extravagance, and here was a second extravagance presenting itself in the day. And he was a good deal more interested in Benton's Codex than he was in the misfortunes of Timmy Eliot's father. This manuscript had been a storm centre for years. It was of prodigious learned interest, and its discovery by Benton in the Levant had won him his Fellowship and much attention he had never received before – attention to which he had reacted in the most dubious way. Printing only what might whet the curiosity of his fellow scholars, he firmly locked up the Codex, intimating that it would not be published until it passed to the nation on his death. When charged with the perversity of this course he was in the habit of replying mysteriously that his action was the consequence of an undertaking he had given to the Sublime Porte. As nobody knew just how he had come by the Codex – nor very much about the Sublime Porte – this contention could not be disproved. But it was widely believed that Benton had simply hit upon a trick for retaining more importance in the scheme of things than was his natural due. If this was so he had abundantly succeeded: the list of honorary degrees which he had collected from universities ambitious one day to possess the Codex was formidable indeed: he had a commodious box overflowing with foreign decorations; the authorities at the British Museum had been devoted students of the

Benton psychology for years; and within the college itself there had been no end of attempts to collar him. A grudge may be none the less keen for being learned. And here was Bussenschutt indulging himself in a demonstration of stored indignation.

Faced with the social duty of blanketing the explosion, Winter felt that this was an expedient moment to bring forward the matter of the Spider. It would be a diversion, and some account of the plight of the Eliots was necessary to make Timmy's request for an exeat reasonable. There was moreover a link of association – rather slight though it might appear – which he could exploit: that of a celebrated female traveller and Benton's Levant. So he plunged. 'By the way, Benton, talking of the Codex: did you ever happen to meet Mrs Birdwire?'

The result of this question was surprising. Benton fell back in his chair with a little cry, his white shirt front splashed with red. There was a moment's bewildered silence, broken by a noise of intense appreciation from Mummery and the whisk of a servant stooping to retrieve the shattered wine-glass. Benton had merely been startled and spilt his port, but the effect was much as if he had been shot or stabbed.

Bussenschutt, whose features were once more heavily benign, was politely offering Benton a table-napkin, but his eyes – and they were formidably intelligent – were upon Winter. And Winter realized with some dismay that he was suspected of deliberately contriving sensation. It is the instinct of common-rooms to divine in any problematical situation the milder forms of malice.

Benton dabbed at shirt and chin. 'A rheumatic twinge,' he said weakly. 'I wish the Thames Valley was not so dreadfully damp. Mrs Birdwire, did you say? I believe we have met. Why do you ask?'

'Because of rather an odd story. Eliot--'

Benton recovered himself sufficiently to scowl. 'A lazy and graceless youth,' he said unpromisingly.

'Eliot's father writes novels. They all concern a character called the Spider.'

Bussenschutt interrupted. 'Our Eliot is *that* Eliot! Dear me, I must ask him to luncheon.'

'Novels?' Benton looked perplexed. 'I sometime wish I had time to read prose fiction. But I have not. And when I come to think of it I doubt if I have a taste that way.' He looked about him more confidently. 'When I come to weigh the matter I am inclined to say that such reading is mere indulgence.' Benton's eye went round the table rather as if searching for a weapon. He took a deep breath. 'Like drink.'

Bussenschutt's hand went suavely to the decanter. 'You read no fiction, Benton? I believe that some of the dialect writers might interest you. For example--'

'There is', said Winter, raising his voice to cut short this familiar logomachy, 'a large number of these Spider novels--'

'Thirty-seven', interrupted Mummery suddenly and authoritatively from the little table. He addressed the ceiling and spoke so loudly that even the people at the big table looked round.

'There are thirty-seven of these novels about the Spider, and he has played various roles in

them. He used to be a super-crook and a gun-runner; now he's a sort of private detective.'

'A crook? A gun-runner? A detective?' Benton repeated the words painfully, rather as if they were highly technical terms in one of the remoter branches of knowledge.

'The masterpiece', said Bussenschutt judicially, 'was undoubtedly *The Spider Bites Back*. There has been nothing so good since.'

'And now', said Winter, who was beginning to enjoy retailing Timmy's sensation, 'the Spider has come alive. And burgled Mrs Birdwire.'

From the little table once more came a whiffling sound. Mummery was finding this more than mildly interesting. So was Bussenschutt. 'The Spider has come alive?' he exclaimed. 'Here is a philosophical quiddity indeed. Benton, my dear fellow, does your ignorance extend to *Frankenstein*?'

Benton, who in point of aggressiveness appeared to have shot his bolt in equating novels and drink, looked quite bewildered. 'Master,' he said, 'I wish you would let Winter tell his story, whatever it may be. Frankenstein? I have heard the name. Didn't he hit on some tombs of the sixth dynasty?'

Bussenschutt shook his head solemnly. 'Quite a different Frankenstein, Benton; quite different. *This* Frankenstein was a Genevan student of natural philosophy.'

'He learnt', said Winter, who was sometimes willing to second Bussenschutt in tormenting Benton, 'the secret of imparting life to inanimate matter. Collecting bones from the charnel-houses,

he constructed the semblance of a human being. He gave it life!

'The creature, endowed with supernatural size and strength' – abruptly Bussenschutt tapped Benton on his port-stained shirt – 'but revolting in appearance, inspired loathing in whoever saw it.' Bussenschutt fixed Benton firmly in the eye. 'Its voice was *horrible*.'

'Really,' said Benton, wriggling in his chair. 'I wish—'

'Lonely and miserable,' continued Winter, 'it was filled with detestation of its creator. It murdered Frankenstein's brother and his bride.'

'And finally,' Bussenschutt concluded, 'Frankenstein himself. The monster may very well roam the world today. Winter, pray continue your story.'

'The Spider', said Winter, 'burgled Mrs Birdwire. And the Spider' – he paused dramatically – '*knows all*.'

This echo of Timmy proved the climax of the evening. Benton sprang to his feet with a hoarse cry and hurried out of the room.

Bussenchutt reached for a cigarette and indicated that coffee might be set before him. 'This', he said comfortably, 'is the most interesting thing that has happened for a long time. How oddly one thing leads to another!' He exchanged a glance of wicked intelligence with Dr Groper above him. 'We speak, my dear Winter, of the association of ideas. But how much more significant are the obscure and obstinate association of fact. Benton's reaction to this burglary which you have tossed at us would make a subject for the pen of the good Mr Eliot himself.'

And now tell me – and need I say Mummery? – all about the incarnation of the Spider.'

Winter repeated Timmy's tale.

In the small hours he repeated it to himself again, with all the distortions, the elaborations, the obscure logical confusions of dream. He was in the common-room more, a common-room of which the floor was fluid and working like a sullen sea. Bussenschutt and Mummery and Benton were there, and a shadowy fourth who must be Timmy Eliot's father, and it was his task to bring these four together at a table on which perched a yet more shadowy figure who was Jasper Shoon, the great collector and armament king, grasping an Attic papyrus. The table floated now at one point and now at another but – as if it were some abstraction of modern physics – could never be detected accomplishing the intervening journey; nor would the people come together as they should. And above the fireplace presided the portrait of Dr Groper, who was a huge and puffy spider, one leg grotesquely cocked at a top-heavy pile of thirty-seven books. Winter knew that his own efforts somehow constituted an attempt at a thirty-eighth book – a book of which the parts would not unite but kept flying to the four corners of his mind.

And then Dr Groper, impatient of order and coherence unachieved, kicked; the books, growing in size with the speed of advancing projectiles, came running down; nothing remained but Winter himself floating on a cold, calm sea. His mind, cold, calm, and as if disengaging itself from the merely fantastic, concentrated on the one purely intellectual problem that had held it in its waking state.

How could a jester, amusing himself at the expense of Mr Eliot, know of literary projects which had perished while still imprisoned in their author's mind?

The answer formed itself, but before it could be grasped was lost in murmurings. Everywhere people murmuring, Timmy chattering, dons talking as those talk whose main business it is to talk; for a moment the common-room was about him again, full of voices, marathons of conversation – and Dr Groper, restored to Raeburn's image, looked approvingly down. He tried to continue thinking and his mind was once more a dream-mind only; it was a Master Mind, of Master Mind of books; he was himself the Spider. He was himself both the Spider and the creatures for whom the Spider wove his webs – as men in the medieval sermons are both feasters and feasted upon at the last great Banquet of all.

And then came Mrs Birdwire. She came down from a corner of the dream, herself a huge web, tropical, of the kind against which men throw themselves in vain. This at least he must avoid: this encounter would be fatal. He ran and Mrs Birdwire, cutting her way through a jungle of telephones and typewriters, followed. He ran till he awoke.

Oxford – adorable dreamer, cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmed, lark-charmed, rook-racked, river-rounded – Oxford shivered, lurched, disintegrated into the fluidity of parallax. A few seconds of mere confusion and rhythm asserted itself: at various speeds the grey pinnacles revolved about their axis in the gasworks. It is with this gesture, stately as a figure in the saraband, that Oxford welcomes you; it is with this gesture that Oxford bids you farewell. Thus does the goddess, loosening her zone to the tempo of the Great Western Railway Company's locomotive, reveal herself to the novice in all her naked loveliness; thus does she gather her garments about her at the unparadising hour. A base and brickish skirt there; graceless growth; and the train whirls you towards the biscuit factories of Reading or crawls with you, maybe, westward into the very womb of England.

Timothy Eliot, curled comfortably in a corner of the compartment with his exeat in his pocket, seemed aware of the symbolism of the accelerating train. 'In a year', he said solemnly, 'they'll be turning me out.' And with the stem of a beautiful straight-grain pipe he gestured comprehensively at the retreating towers.

Winter, whose breakfast had been more hurried than he would have wished, peered over *The Times*. 'One of the best types', he said, 'that Oxford turns out. But definitely – praise God –

turns out. And you wouldn't want to be a don, would you?'

Timmy stuffed the pipe – with one of those nameless but expensive mixtures, Winter noticed, which Oxford tobaccoists delight to compound for the young on the bespoke principle. He eyed his tutor doubtfully. 'I'm not sure. It seems a pleasant friendly sort of life in its dim way.'

'No doubt.' Winter thought of Bussenschutt, Mummery, and Benton.

'And I'm able enough.'

'No doubt.'

'Well, I am, aren't I?'

'You are abundantly lazy. And it's not so much a matter of ability as of temperament. And now give me ten minutes with this newspaper and we'll talk of something interesting.'

'Oh, the Spider.' Having secured Winter's company Timmy seemed in no hurry to enlighten him further on the curious situation at home. He fumbled in his pockets. 'I say, have you got a match? I meant to steal some from the JCR.'

Disapprovingly Winter produced matches. 'You must be a tolerably wealthy young man. I don't see that you need to sponge on the people who pay for common-room matches.'

Timmy smiled sleepily; he had eaten a kipper, bacon and two eggs, his own rack of toast and his host's, together with about a third of a pot of Frank Cooper's marmalade. 'Oh well,' he said, 'I suppose I pay for them myself in a roundabout way.'

'You pay at the outside for every third match. The others are paid for by William of Chalfont,

Richard à Lys, Sir Humphrey Bohun, and other benefactors of the college these many centuries deceased. Oxford takes your penny to give you at least threepence in return.'

'*Tant mieux*,' said Timmy impudently. He was a youth who exquisitely knew how to trade on the *élan* of nonage. 'I think', he added maliciously, 'you'll find the obituaries on page six.' And he subsided for a time into a copy of *New Verse*.

Winter, who had in fact the habit of beginning with the obituaries turned not without ostentation to the law reports. And presently Timmy, having read a few poems with great concentration and a few reviews with sympathetic and ribald amusement, began again. He put down the magazine and said firmly: '*Que faire?*'

'I beg your pardon?'

'*Que faire?* Means "What's to be done?".'

'Thank you.'

'I mean, here you are giving me a liberal education – and what do I know? What the hell *do* I know? If I want to get a job, you know: that sort of thing.'

Resignedly Winter stood up and stowed *The Times* in his suitcase.

'Is this', he asked, 'relevant to our present expedition?'

'I don't know that it is. But I'm moderately serious. About what you're cashing me in on and what I'm fit for – all that.'

'I've just explained on what, in your abominable jargon, you cash in. William of Chalfont and Richard à Lys. Who so arranged things that for a quite inconsiderable outlay you

are enjoying comfortable quarters, tolerably polite society, the run of two or three million books, and a highly evolved system of individual education the stamp of which – heaven help me – you will carry to the grave. And now perhaps you will tell me a little more about the Spider.'

Timmy shook his head obstinately. 'Presently. Go on about what I'm collecting. It's comforting.'

'Very well. To that grave' – and Winter pointed dramatically to the floor of the compartment – 'you will also carry a nervous tone which is the product of careful physical nurture: of knowledge of the use and abuse of wine, of cookery to subsidize which miners toil in Wales and Kalgoorlie, of the frequentation on the Isis of costly racing craft to perfect which craftsmen have laboured for generations. In a word, skilfully tempered in body, you are privileged to survey the world from the very citadel—'

Timmy sighed. 'You do talk well. You even know where to take breath in these sentences.'

You are a very impertinent young man. And your impertinence is only redeemed by a breeding which has again cost a great deal of money. As to what you *know*: thanks to me you know some Greek and Latin; and thanks to the prosperous Eliot's having the freedom of Europe you know a great deal of French and German and a very respectable amount of Italian. As to what you could *do*: I daresay a travel agency might give you a job as an interpreter at a big railway station.'

Timmy touched his hat and twirled imaginary moustaches. 'Not a bad notion. As a matter of fact I'm thinking of something not dissimilar. The diplomatic. You know Hugo is going in.' And

Timmy smiled happily. He was always in love. At the moment, Winter understood, it was a desolatingly orthodox man at New College.

'Your Hugo Toplady? I expect he was at Eton? Don't you think you should have gone there as your father wanted if you were after diplomatic laurels?'

'I believe they put up with a moderated eccentricity nowadays. As I say – it's just a notion. And anyway, I don't think I want to do anything learned. Daddy's by way of being learned when the Spider stuff lets him. And so is Belinda.'

'Belinda?'

'My big sister. Daddy's keen on Pope. Called his daughter after a girl who was raped in one of his poems.'

Winter made an articulate noise reminiscent of his colleague Mummery. 'Tell that', he said, 'to the Foreign Office. Just the thing to ingratiate you with a board of retired ambassadors. But at least we're getting somewhere at last. You have a sister Belinda. Continue to tell me about the Eliots.' He paused. 'That is if you really want to. For I begin to suspect that you have persuaded me to this jaunt merely because you knew I could get you your confounded exeat.'

Timmy made a childish gesture of cutting his throat. 'Not so. By the way: was it difficult?'

'Very. I had to interview Benton in his bedroom at midnight – and after having put my foot in it most resoundingly in the common-room. I had to employ tact; bribery indeed. I had to let him in on a very nice epigraphical problem I had been keeping to myself.'

'Poor Mr Benton; he loves me not. That Oxford nervous tone, by the way – Benton's not a very good advertisement for it?'

Winter eyed his pupil thoughtfully. 'Benton is an importation. And as nervous as could be. Why do you ask?'

Timmy shook his head vaguely. 'Just that he loves me not – which shows that he must have a troubled soul. And thank you for giving away your problem. And I do most sincerely want your help.' For a moment Timmy's eyes expressed the quintessence of sincerity. Then he added: 'And we'll have a good weekend anyway. Hugo's coming down too.'

'The devil he is!'

'As a matter of fact, he's on the train now. But of course travelling soft.'

'Of course.'

Timmy stretched himself and assumed an expression of deliberate, blood-chilling idiocy. 'It's wonderful, isn't it,' he said, 'to know a chap like that?'

Winter looked about the compartment. 'Timmy – at your boy-and-girl school – did they ever cane anybody?'

'Absolutely not. I am virgin of the rod.'

'I see no reason why it should be too late to begin.'

'And now', said Timmy briskly, 'once more about the Spider.'

The Spider – the incarnate and disturbing Spider – had made his existence known over the telephone. Of this first incident Timmy, once launched on his subject, gave a fluent and

circumstantial account. He was playing piquet one evening with his father in the library when the bell rang. Mr Eliot picked up the instrument – it was within reach as he sat – and was about to speak; then he checked himself and listened for some seconds in evident annoyance. He made a motion as if to return the receiver to its place, changed his mind, listened for a few seconds more, and finally rammed the receiver down with an exclamation of anger. He turned to Timmy, remarked that it was a pity secretaries had to have holidays like human beings, and went on with his game.

Normally all calls went to Mr Eliot's secretary and it was only because the secretary was away on holiday that the instrument in the library was directly in contact with the outer world. Timmy conjectured from his father's rather acid joke that the message had been of the pestering sort that celebrities must endure and he therefore expressed no curiosity. This forbearance was rewarded. Later in the evening Mr Eliot explained. When he picked up the receiver a voice had immediately said: 'I am the Spider. I know all.' This was the point at which Mr Eliot had thought of cutting off the caller and refrained. The voice had then said: 'I have a warning for your paramour Mrs Birdwire.' And this was when Mr Eliot had angrily put the receiver down. Three nights later the burglary at Mrs Birdwire's took place.

And after this the Spider got into his stride. One afternoon the vicar called in barely concealed panic. The Spider, it seemed, had again intimated that he knew all. Mr Eliot had the delicate task of reassuring his visitor while steering clear of embarrassing confidence; he conjectured, he told

Timmy, that the secret which lay heavy on the vicar's conscience was Intellectual Doubt. Then there was the village schoolmistress. The Spider – presumably the Spider *qua* detective – let her know that Mr Eliot, and Mr Eliot alone, could reveal to her the mystery of her true paternity. The subject was one on which the schoolmistress had never before entertained doubt; nevertheless the Spider had chosen the recipient of his message with rudimentary psychological skill and Mr Eliot was put to a good deal of trouble before the matter was smoothed over. And hard upon this the Spider contrived several similar absurdities. This represented the first phase of his activities.

The second phase was more subtle. And logically it should have come first. For whereas in the earlier phase the Spider was already an independent agent, devising actions according to his own fancy, in this later phase he contrived to give the impression of painfully breaking free from that ink and paper prison in which he had hitherto had his being. The effect, Timmy put it with a flight of fancy, was as if the inanimate-seeming husk of his father's books had trembled and cracked – and from the chrysalis there had struggled a living thing. Or it was like an advertisement which he remembered as particularly impressing his youth: that pioneer piece of surrealism in which the ancestors are stepping down from the walls to enjoy a well-known brand of whisky.

It was some time before Mr Eliot appeared to realize what was happening. His habits of composition were a little unusual; commonly he liked to work on two novels simultaneously and in addition to these there would be a number of

short stories to which he gave sporadic attention. For years his work had been troublesome to him and when he spoke of it his tone was not infrequently one of irritation. This tendency, as might be imagined, was accentuated at the time of the incidents centring in the Birdwire burglary. And then came a change. Mr Eliot several times spoke with satisfaction of the current novels; he thought there was unusual life in them. The characters were coming alive and going their own way. This is always something grateful to the novelist, even if the result is sleepless nights trying to rebuild a shattered plot. And Mr Eliot, who had peopled thirty-seven volumes with automata, was apparently pleasantly excited at the new sense of his creations stirring beneath his hand. But this feeling lasted only a short time. Mr Eliot was observed to be in increasing perplexity; one morning he held a consultation with his secretary; and the true explanation of his sense of an independent life in his characters emerged. Mr Eliot's manuscripts were mysteriously rewriting themselves in their files.

Timmy had got so far when Winter raised a protesting hand. 'Young man, it is you who talk far, far too well. You ought to go into the family business. Do you realize how much you are dramatizing these absurd occurrences? The manuscripts were mysteriously rewriting themselves, indeed!'

Timmy, who had certainly been doing his best to present a dramatic narrative, opened innocent round eyes. 'But it was just so! The manuscripts had been rewriting themselves in the dark. When the Spider was being taken in a direction he didn't want to go he simply cancelled a sentence

or a paragraph or a page and inserted one according to his own ideas.'

For a moment Winter looked blankly incredulous. Then he shook his head. 'I repeat, you have the family talent for a yarn. And it makes you a thoroughly annoying witness. What form were these manuscripts in? Where were they kept? How often were they tampered with? And, above all, how could your father not see at once what was happening?'

'One question at a time, please. And I'm trying to give you the thing somewhat as it affected daddy. I think that's important; don't you?'

'No doubt. What form were these manuscripts in?'

Disconcertingly and for a split second the smooth projectile in which they were travelling moved in two directions at once; steadying itself, it rattled comfortably over a maze of points. 'Paddington', said Timmy. 'All change.'

The people whom one has successfully dodged getting in one often bumps into getting out. On the platform, and while Timmy was looking for a porter to carry his unnecessarily bulky suitcase, Winter bumped into Bussenschutt.

'Ah, my dear fellow: off again?' Bussenschutt's eye, beaming its horrid geniality, turned towards Timmy. 'Is not that the young Eliot of whom we were speaking?'

'Yes; I am spending the weekend at his home.'

'And catching the Spider?' Bussenschutt deftly gestured amused tolerance. '*Soyez heureux, mes enfants; vous êtes encore jeunes.*'

Winter, whose doubts about his expedition were not decreasing, smiled without friendliness. 'You are up for a night in town, Master?' He sunk his voice in outrageous simulation of confidence. 'My great-uncle Edward tells me that at the Vanity what he calls the beauty-chorus is better than ever.'

Bussenschutt smiled in turn – with the indulgence of one who will acknowledge even a feeble thrust. 'I am going down', he said, 'to see Shoon. This interesting matter of his papyrus. I hope he may favour me with a photostat. My generation, my dear Winter, is not sufficiently talented to square scholarship with the forty hour week. Have a care in walking into that Parlour. And now I must pick up a taxi. *Au revoir*.'

Winter took off his hat. '*Au revoir*, Master,' he said cheerfully. 'See that it's a taxi.' He retreated feeling that in this deplorable encounter the last round was his.

Timmy, now farther down the platform, was revolving about a tall young man in the most inflexible uniform of travel: bowler, umbrella, and the yellowest of gloves. Timmy was evidently in a quiet ecstasy. 'I say, Winter – do you know Hugo Toplady? Hugo, this is Gerald Winter.'

Toplady, with the air of one who makes an important decision with practised rapidity, said, 'How do you do.' Amid vague remarks all three bundled into a cab. They jerked out of the station into the recurrently astounding uproar of London.

'I've been telling Winter', said Timmy, 'about the Spider affair. He is confident he can solve it.'

Winter opened his mouth and was forestalled by Toplady. 'A horrid foolery,' he said. 'One sees that it is a joke, but decidedly not the sort of joke

one sees.' He tapped the floor of the taxi with the attenuated ferrule of his umbrella.

'Not the sort of joke one sees.' Timmy, repeating the words as he might repeat a particularly precious line of Dante, contrived to tread deftly and cruelly on Winter's toes. Timmy's loves were always fortified by irony. One day, Winter reflected, he might be a great lover; he had the not common ability of adoring what was actually there.

'I think', pursued Toplady, evidently encouraged by his admirer's approbation, 'that what your father might usefully think of is making a call. That would be the best course to my mind: a call.' He turned to Winter, appeared to make a brief calculation of his age, and said conscientiously: 'Mr Winter, you agree?'

Winter tucked his feet under him. 'But – er – on whom is the call to be made?'

Toplady frowned. 'That', he said, 'is the next thing to consider.'

Gently the taxi bumped into another taxi in front.

Over the river the train runs from the London of landmarks and unique statements to the London of remorseless repetitions and submerged identities, the London of a million chimney-pots, each assertive only of the uselessness of assertion. Rapidly traversed, this region demonstrates that things in general are without an objective and without a plan. How fortunate, thought Winter, that in the train we are of another world, in which life is a matter of efficiently accomplished journeys in pursuit of

rational ends! He frowned and stood up to reach himself *The Times*. The unread obituaries were still a refuge between himself and the advancing perplexities of the Eliots.

'I think', said Toplady, leaning back in somewhat apprehensive experiment in the third-class carriage, 'the chief constable.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Mr Eliot's call. The chief constable – or a person of that sort.'

Timmy, who was curled in a corner making a brazenly childish assault on a large square of chocolate, interrupted. 'By the way, Winter, we are discovered – did you know? I saw the Master climbing in at the back.'

'Bussenschutt? He's off to see an old party called Shoon.'

'Shoon? Why, that's–'

'The chief constable', said Toplady politely but firmly. 'Or a person of that sort.'

Timmy, busy stripping the last shred of tinfoil from his refection, shook his head. 'Chief constables or such-like did come in over the Birdwire burglary. But daddy didn't like them. You see, the books are full of policemen. It used to be the Spider's regular business to outwit them. Now he simply outpaces them. In either case they have to be pretty painfully stupid. So when it proves necessary for real police to come in and investigate us – investigate something that seems actually to spring from the books – naturally daddy finds it a bit–'

'Embarrassing.' Toplady helpfully supplied what appeared to be the key word in description of Mr

Eliot's position. 'We must look elsewhere.' He took off his bowler and peered into that.

'It is', said Timmy, 'a bit difficult to know how to move. You'll both realize that when you get a whiff of our household. Daddy's very shy.'

Winter rather wondered if the very shy Mr Eliot was going greatly to relish either an inquisition by a strange don or the diplomatic counsels of the admired Toplady. 'Does your father', he asked with sudden suspicion, 'know that we're coming down?'

'Yes, indeed, Winter. I sent him a telegram just before we set off.'

'I see.'

'You needn't be alarmed. He doesn't a bit mind whom we bring down.'

Toplady, who was brushing his bowler in an elderly way with the sleeve of his overcoat, desisted as if aware that this last remark of his friend's required analysis. Winter said: 'We are relieved.'

'Of course I haven't told him about Chown.'

'About *Chown*?'

'Yes: the psychiatrist. I've asked him down too. I thought he might penetrate to the mind and motive of the joker. Will he be expensive?'

'Very.' Winter nodded emphatically. 'And I may say I'm thinking of putting in a bill myself.'

Toplady directed upon Winter a glance of restrained social censure. 'I have it in mind', he said carefully, 'that a friend has told me of his impression, gained perhaps indirectly, that in more than one family Herbert Chown has been helpful; indeed, very helpful indeed. But I do

think, Timmy – and I not only think but I say – that it would have been wiser, and indeed more the thing, if a friend may go as far as to say that too, to let your father judge for himself if Chown's help is needed, and if needed desired.'

Timmy was quite abashed – a state of feeling, Winter reflected, which he himself had never been able to induce in his pupil. 'But, Hugo, please–'

'And if', continued Toplady, 'you have – as I think I may say I suspect you have, as you have said you have mentioned something of it to Mr Winter – called in Chown because of a feeling of anxiety as to how your father is taking the thing, that, though another matter, is also a graver one which I hope you have thought to discuss with some older member of your family. Have you?'

Into the serious Toplady, Winter was thinking, it would be nice to stick a pin. Nevertheless there was sense in his laborious precision and it seemed possible moreover that he might elicit from Timmy a less fragmentary account of the Eliot mystery than he had hitherto given. So Winter chorused approvingly: 'Have you?'

Timmy slid back the corridor door and pitched his chocolate paper not very tidily through it. 'Well, no. Chown is a slight acquaintance of the family and I thought he might be brought down without remark. And I did think he might calm daddy down a bit; they've had dealings before. But chiefly I hoped he could tell us what sort of brain was at work.'

'Is it', asked Winter, 'calming down your father to bring home a whole' – he looked blandly at the sedate Toplady – 'circus?'

'I thought the problem might be tackled from several sides at once. It was as soon as I heard that Chown would come that I ran up to collar you. And then I went round and collected Hugo. Perhaps it is all rather on a grand scale. But I assure you we shall hardly be noticed in the crowd.'

'The crowd?'

'The Spider's twenty-firsters,' said Timmy. 'Ever such a big party.' Delicately he licked a chocolate-coated thumb and produced his clamantly thoroughbred pipe. 'Winter, might I have those matches again, please?'

There was a heavy silence. What a tangled web, thought Winter sadly regarding Timmy, we weave when once we practise to deceive. 'I understood', he said, 'that these pointless and elaborate jokes had thrown your father into considerable distress of mind. Do you mean to say that he has chosen this moment to hold a junketing in the Spider's honour?'

'Surely', said Toplady, acting chorus in his turn, 'he hasn't done that?'

'It's not really daddy; it's his publisher – chap called Wedge. He arranges the birthday-party every year, and then he puts it in his house journal and even gets bits into the illustrated weeklies. And this particular year daddy didn't like to put him off.'

Toplady looked at the communication cord and made a tentative movement to grab his hat. Then he sank back in his seat and said, 'Publicity.' Just so, Winter thought, might medieval man have said, 'Plague.'

'Daddy sent me a note who's coming. I expect there are quite a number travelling down now.' Timmy stood up to reach for his coat. 'Oh, bother; they always get the lights wrong on this futile line.' For with a hoot the train had plunged abruptly into darkness. 'It's the only tunnel and they often forget—'

Timmy's voice and the rattle of the train's subterranean plunge were alike drowned in awful and bewildering clamour. A pandemonium of sound, latrant, mugient, reboatory, and beyond all words, reverberated between the walls of the tunnel. The multitude of the damned, vocal with all the sad variety of hell, could scarcely have surpassed the momentary effect of horror. It was only momentary; then the unknown identified itself as dogs – a disgracefully large number of dogs in a neighbouring compartment. Toplady was heard saying 'Dogs!'; there were bumping noises in the corridor; a strident female voice said, 'Guard!'; the tardy lights switched on overhead; seconds later the train ran into daylight.

Timmy, still standing up, thrust his head into the corridor – as a number of disturbed passengers were doing. 'What a filthy – oh, lord!'

The strident female voice had drawn nearer. Raised above the continued ululations of the dogs, it expressed the brisk and authoritative displeasure of the propertied classes. 'These', it said, 'are most sensitive animals – *most* sensitive. It is disgraceful that they should be exposed to such carelessness. Can't you hear how upset they are?'

'Yes, ma'am. The whole train can do that.' That man's voice was that of one who remembers and resents that he has been bribed. 'But the dogs

oughtn't rightly to be in the compartment at all. Look at their tickets and you'll see it says the van.'

Timmy leant forward and whispered to his companions. 'If we're not all getting together! It's the Birdwire outfit *en route*.'

At this Winter warily thrust out his head in turn. A little way off, and outside a first-class compartment, an aggressively tweeded female, of the sort whose characteristic accoutrements are binoculars, a shooting-stick, and a large cardboard label, was rebuking a uniformed attendant. What they call a stone-in-the-rain, thought Winter – and let his glance travel farther down the corridor. Beyond a vista of indignant faces, and from the last compartment of all, protruded the supremely indignant face of Bussenschutt. Winter bowed politely to this ultimate appearance and withdrew his head. Still supported by a swelling canine diapason, the strident voice continued. 'We shall *not* make a complaint. Mrs Birdwire is *not* that sort of person. But please be more careful about the lights another time. It is bad for the dogs. And might lead to immorality as well. And now please see that we are brought coffee and biscuits.' There was the sound of a door slid to and for a moment the doggy din was muted. Then it rose again as the door was reopened and the stone-in-the-rain, more stridently yet to catch the retreating attendant, called: 'Mrs Birdwire must have *ginger* biscuits.'

'The woman', said Timmy, 'is the Birdwire's familiar. Name of Pike. Lady Pike. The Pike is awfully wealthy – much wealthier than the Birdwire. But being God's own hanger-on she lives with the Birdwire and manages for her.

Anima naturaliter toady.' Timmy smiled complacently, apparently in tribute to his own skill in character-drawing. 'If you meet her', he added as an afterthought, 'she'll ask you if you have a garden of character.'

Winter was thinking of Benton. He wondered if Bussenschutt in his compartment was aware that the Lady whose chattels had created the recent uproar was the same whose name had so disturbed his senior tutor. In explanation of that subsidiary mystery it could now at least be said that the Birdwire milieu was likely to be uncongenial to the academic mind. And Winter turned to Timmy. 'I hope', he said, 'not to meet either of them. I take it they're not likely to be asked to the party?'

'Not at all likely. But they might turn up. The Birdwire likes enemies as well as friends. An aggressive old person. Daddy isn't at all aggressive.'

Timmy,' said Toplady, seizing upon this opportunity with a readiness which Winter had to admire, 'I would like you to tell us something about your father. Or rather, just because you have told us something, I think we may fairly ask you to tell us something more. For if as we have been given to suppose you believe that it isn't without a certain effect on his spirits and indeed on his way of feeling about things generally that this thing has happened, then it will be better surely, if we are to be of any help – and indeed for the mere business of getting on in an unembarrassed way – that we should know just how and to what extent that certain effect is evident.'

This tactful composition, Winter said to himself, was to the point. The fantasy of the vitalized

Spider was in itself pleasing enough, but by resulting mental derangement in his prospective host he was unprepared to be amused. Timmy's account of his father's condition had been vague – and probably slightly alarmist; here was Toplady decently pressing for exacter information. Waiting with some keenness for Timmy's reply. Winter felt slightly uncomfortable; and it was this perhaps that prompted him to stick his head once more into the corridor and look round. He was just in time for something odd.

He saw an eye. Quite far away – beyond the end compartment which he knew housed Bussenschutt – and appearing cautiously from a little recess which led to a lavatory, he saw an eye and exactly as much of a man's face as an eye must carry with it if it is to peer successfully round a corner. The effect was curiously unreal – suggestive, it occurred to Winter, less of cautious observation than of a pictorial convention of cautious observation on the cover of a magazine – and it was fleeting; in a moment the eye was seconded by an uncertain nose, half of a close-cropped grey moustache and the corresponding half of a rather less uncertain mouth. Then the whole man came into view – a middle-aged man clad with casual and well-worn elegance – and stepped hurriedly down the corridor. Reaching the neighbourhood of Mrs Birdwire's and Lady Pike's compartment, and as if suddenly infected by the brute creation still intermittently vociferous within, he dropped on his hands and knees and scampered briskly past. Then he rose to his feet with deftness and dignity, glanced rapidly into several compartments, murmuring aloud the while. He came nearer, paused to allow Winter to withdraw his head, turned in through the open

door, and – still murmuring – sat down. He looked absently round – first at Timmy, then at Toplady, and then at Winter. Finally his glance returned to Timmy and broke into friendly recognition. ‘Hullo’, he said, ‘how are you?’

‘Gerald Winter and Hugo Toplady,’ said Timmy formally, ‘– my father.’

Mr Eliot – the student of Pope, creator of the Spider, and parent doomed to the bin – preserved in middle-age the athletic slimness of his son. But though spare rather than rotund he gave something of the impression of a child's balloon – of a delicate equilibrium, vibrating with the promise of rising gently into the air at a touch, and this buoyancy carrying with it in its turn the suggestion of deflatability. Mr Eliot, it might be hazarded, possessed the sort of good spirits that are the more engaging for being of a sort peculiarly vulnerable to the arrows of fate. And he was indeed probably shy; he had the rapid social instinct which the shy and cultivated must develop. 'I hope', he said, 'that Timmy is bringing you down to stop with us?'

Winter and Toplady made the grateful murmurings of those who feel that their position is being regularized. Timmy said something about his telegram. Mr Eliot nodded with a vagueness which was still perhaps tact. 'I had to run up to town,' he said; 'a thing that doesn't often happen nowadays. But Belinda will have got the wire and be sending someone to the station. I'm afraid' – and he addressed Winter – 'that this is a very tedious train. Sometimes I've thought of writing to the company.' He paused on the polite implication that this was an issue on which Winter might say the wisely definitive word. 'But I've no doubt', he added practically, 'that its vagaries are directed at dividends, and I'm a shareholder

myself. Still, it's very tedious, particularly if one isn't used to it,' and Mr Eliot smiled, clearly finding the tediousness of his train among this world's soothing and satisfactory things.

With considerable relief Winter determined that Mr Eliot was demonstrably sane. But he felt an impulse of irritation against the romancing of Timmy. And it was perhaps as a reflex to this that he said, not wholly kindly: 'I find this train not at all unentertaining.' He let his eye stray to the corridor.

Toplady, though ignorant of Mr Eliot's peculiar proceedings of a few minutes before, divined the need for intervention. 'The house on the hill', he said didactically and with unusual directness, 'belongs to some cousins of mine.'

They all looked out of the window. Perched with urbane aggressiveness on top of a hill – and violating thereby the nicest canons of its period – was a spreading eighteenth-century mansion, its empty and impeccable proportions emphasized against a wintry sky-line. 'A big house,' said Winter with malicious respect. He glimpsed Timmy grinning understandingly – as with the intimation of his knowing from experience that his tutor was feeling relieved, annoyed, and ready to plunge into sustained verbal extravagance.

Toplady, conscious that his claim had been without motive of arrogance, proceeded to set the now retreating mansion in a sympathetic light. 'Steynfield Hall,' he said. 'Even more than it would be so unhappily natural to suppose, they have been hit by death duties during the past thirty years. Recently my cousin had to disperse the library. And now he thinks – or so it is thought – that he may even have to give up his

mastership of hounds. How bad – are they not? – things are.'

The landowner in Mr Eliot nodded sincere by absent agreement. The novelist – Winter suspected – made a mental note of Toplady's peculiar rhetoric. But it was a third Mr Eliot who spoke. 'The Steynfield library? I remember the sale very well. There were several Caxtons. Belinda went.' He turned to Winter. 'My daughter is interested in early printers' devices.' He spoke casually, as a well-bred man plays his trump card. 'She has already had one or two papers in the *Library*.' Mr Eliot's eye glanced with a hint of reproach towards Timmy and returned, with the same hint faintly lingering, to Winter. It would be nice, the remote implication ran, if Belinda's brother had caught similar scholarly tastes from his tutor.

From Timmy's corner came a succession of faint snaps. He had produced another cake of chocolate and was breaking it into irregular chunks. 'Books,' he said, 'tis a dull and endless strife. Chocolate?'

Mr Eliot took a piece of chocolate and father and son sat munching side by side. 'Come, hear the woodland linnet? Yes – yes, indeed. But I don't think Wordsworth meant to condemn books outright – or even bookishness. He speaks very appreciatively of books in the *Prelude*. We couldn't really get on without books; not even without that sort of books to the making of which there is no end. Don't you think?' And Mr Eliot, plainly proposing the pleasures of a little literary conversation, turned again to Winter.

At this moment the train bumped to a stop. 'The junction,' said Timmy. In his voice was the

peculiar tone by which the outsider recognizes a family joke.

Mr Eliot, hitherto a monument of placid content, was at this transformed into a vessel of quintessential and incomprehensible gaiety – a gaiety that stirred neither in word nor in gesture but was all in a momentary translucency of the physical man, as if someone had contrived an exquisite electrical effect. At the same time he contrived to appear acutely apprehensive. ‘You look,’ he said urgently to his son.

Timmy looked. So did Winter. At the tail-end of the train Bussenschutt was descending, in his bearing the annoyance of a man who steps out of a first-class carriage and fails to find a porter within hail. The porters were all farther up the platform where a largish group of people, the majority apparently known to each other, was already standing amid little piles of luggage. In a yard beyond stood a row of cars; a chauffeur with an old and roomy saloon of the sort that discreetly wealthy people keep to meet trains at country stations, a disguised gardener with another of the same and a stable lad with a yet older and roomier tourer. Decently calculated noticeableness was given to the assemblage by the fact that the whole of it, with the exception of the stable lad, was in that delicate shade of cream known to conservative coach-builders as Queen Anne’s white. And towards it, with the enhanced cheerfulness of travellers who realize that now somebody else is going to pay, moved the group of people who had got off in front.

‘You see,’ said Timmy, ‘we print the junction on our notepaper and have people met.’

‘But this,’ said Mr Eliot, ‘is the through carriage. That’s why I moved along.’

'In about five minutes they'll back us into the siding.'

'The only trouble is that the heating goes off. But nowadays the wait is only half-an-hour till they hitch us on to a local train.' Mr Eliot produced a pipe which was almost the twin of Timmy's. 'I hope you don't mind.'

Winter, who suddenly felt he had been travelling all day, drew his overcoat about him and made an affable noise. Toplady said: 'Not at all. Are there many stops?'

'Warter,' said Timmy, 'King's Cleeve, and Wing.'

'Low Swaffham,' said Mr Eliot, 'Pigg, Little Limber, Snug, Cold Findon, and Rust. It means that by the time we arrive Belinda will have settled them all nicely in.' He filled his pipe and turned to Winter. 'I wonder if you happen to have a match? I meant to pick some up in my club.'

'Wing,' said Timmy – and braced himself against the opposite seat. 'It's a curious thing about trains, but the slower they go the quicker they stop.' He pause. 'Listen – I can still hear the dogs. Those awful women must have had the same idea as ourselves.'

'I'm afraid', said Mr Eliot, 'that this is a very tedious train. I wonder if we ought to close the window?'

Curling and uncurling his toes within his shoes, and finding a satisfactory ambiguity in the ejaculation, Winter said 'Pigg!' Mr Eliot rubbed with a glove at the window, saying 'Pigg?' as if surprised that they had got so far. And Timmy, chanting 'Pigg, Pigg, Pigg – oh, Hugo, I must take

you to Pigg!', wriggled on his seat in the obscure enjoyment of some sentiment of childhood.

Winter felt pervasively numb. He had ceased, against his better knowledge, to believe in any mystery of the Spider, or in the existence of Mrs Birdwire and Lady Pike along the corridor, or even in the enviable crowd and guests who had been conveyed to the Eliot home so much more expeditiously than himself. It was only a little past midday, but interminably the train seemed to have been travelling through an England enfolded in cold, in half-light, and in gloom. 'No,' he said, resuming his literary conversation with Mr Eliot and speaking so emphatically that Toplady started. 'I think that books are a mistake, and that more books are more mistaken still. One's sole legitimate satisfaction in contemplating the production of literature is in the knowledge that the process has a mathematical limit; that there will come a point, just as there will with music, at which it will be possible to produce only what somebody else has produced before.'

Mr Eliot knocked out his pipe. 'That', he said amiably, 'is pretty much the position already.'

'But I am speaking exactly. The human vocabulary is limited and can be arranged only in a finite number of ways. The combinations must eventually exhaust themselves. Consider' – said Winter – 'an observer from a planet with somewhat different habits from ours prowling about and watching writers at work.'

Toplady, who plainly thought this an unprofitable thing to consider, reached for *The Times*.

'Consider this detached observer viewing the ceaseless labour of writers in shuffling and

rearranging words. Might be not rationally suppose that this matter of the possible combinations was the end on view?’

Mr Eliot considered carefully, a light cloud of perplexity on his face. ‘Yes, I see what you mean. I can conceive an attitude from which all the writing that ever was might appear as a fragment of some pointless mathematical labour. Only your observer would soon see that the combination were being pursued in a very haphazard manner.’ And Mr Eliot looked enquiringly at Winter, seeming to wonder if he were making the right responses in this eccentric conversation.

‘Exactly!’ Winter, turning up the collar of his coat, nodded with an exaggerated air of logical keenness. ‘So why not organize and concentrate? Students of language have demonstrated the possibility of putting a linguistic instrument adequate to every operation of the human intellect upon a single sheet of notepaper. A steady drive for say a couple of centuries with that – a steady working out, regardless of the distractions of seeming sense and nonsense, of the possible combinations of such a rational language–’

‘Little Limber,’ said Timmy.

‘Snug,’ said Timmy.

‘...And the intellectual frailty’, said Winter – who had persuaded himself that he must talk or freeze – ‘of believing that by feeding the flux of experience once more through the typewriter, twisting it here and there with exhausting and boring prestidigitation into the casually pleasing effects which are called art–’

He stopped. Mr Eliot was listening with the politest attention, but rather – Winter suddenly

saw – as a matter of duty than of pleasure. It was not that Mr Eliot was incapable of following a fantastic argument; it was simply that this sort of thing was not his pigeon. Emancipated from his own popular literary labours Mr Eliot was serious. Sustained by the sense of a serious environment – of reasonably conducted dons and of daughters who studied early printers' devices – he could be spontaneously gay. But faced with levity where he expected the solemnities of literary discussion he became perplexed and his gaiety faded; his whole personality faded visibly, as figures on a stage fade into insubstantiality at a touch on a dimmer. Winter, made aware of this oddly physical effect and divining something of the mechanism at work, was conscious too that he had rashly proceeded farther in his absurd theme than was tactful or even decent. This amiable and volatile gentleman, in whose house he was going to stay in obscure and somewhat uncomfortable circumstances, was the manufacturer of thirty-seven romances. And Winter, to beguile this chilly and trundling tail-end of a journey, had been presenting him with an extravagant vision of the profession of letters as an ant-like activity, one of the ultimate futilities of the human spirit. Mr Eliot, it was true, had begun the debate, but on the most unpretentious level. There had been no call for aggressive pyrotechnics in reply. Appalled by a sudden sense of his sins – a sense pointed by the positively cliff-like symbol of dissociation into which the so correct Toplady had erected *The Times* – he tumbled into apology. He had been talking, he was sure, most tedious nonsense. He even stopped curling and uncurling his toes, as if that too were an offence against the bread and salt he was presently to consume.

There was a slightly awkward pause. It was terminated by the voice of Toplady. 'Old Findon?' he asked.

'Cold Findon,' said Timmy.

'A tedious train,' said Mr Eliot. But this time he spoke as if he meant it. He peered despondently through the window – a different being from the gentleman who had so childishly and delightedly eluded his guests. 'How melancholy the winter landscape can be.'

Winter peered too. A cottage, a haystack chopped like a half- consumed loaf, an unstartled Jersey cow – these had as background bare fields cross-hatched with hedgerows and beyond them a gentle grassy swell – the fringes of downland country – crowned with a grove of oaks. And on the other side the face of nature stretched away in similar severe neutrality – waiting, Winter thought, for such as Mr Eliot to pump in something of their own changing chemistry. Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud.

'I am interested', said Mr Eliot, 'in what you have been saying about writing. It reminds me of a passage in the third part of *Gulliver's Travels* – the one filled with the pedants and people of barrenly ingenious mind.' He paused to smile at Winter – evidently he was not guileless and continued in careful *résumé*. 'You will remember the professor who had perfected a machine for improving speculative knowledge by practical and mechanical operations? It was an enormous mosaic of words; what you have called a whole human vocabulary. The professor's pupil manipulated levers, the whole mosaic fell into a new order, and the result was noted down. In

time the device was going to give the world a complete body of all arts and sciences. The satire, at its most obvious, is directed at the professor and his nonsensical invention. But it is meant, perhaps, to hit at the arts and sciences too – to hit, just as you have been so amusingly doing, at the whole business of writing. Writing is a matter of shoving the words about and might very well be done by a machine.'

Mr Eliot paused and for a moment looked doubtfully at Winter. Then his eye grew abstracted, searching some problematical territory in front of him. 'Swift', he said, 'distrusted what he called vain babbling and mere sound of words. He distrusted the *Word*; perhaps he feared it.'

Toplady put down *The Times* – cautiously. Timmy, who had been fidgeting, was sitting very still.

'Swift,' said Mr Eliot, 'the most rational of men, feared the Word because it is magical. He tried never to use it magically; only flatly, barely, rationally. But – because he understood as well as feared – the magic crowded in upon his writing. He shoved the words about and somewhere' – Mr Eliot gestured diffidently – 'another world acknowledged a fresh act of creation. Mr Winter: Lilliput and Brobdingnag – would you deny that they exist?'

The little train rattled sleepily but pertinaciously onwards; the engine whistled; from down the corridor came the subdued whine of a Birdwire dog. But within the compartment silence was absolute.

'It is', said Mr Eliot, 'a metaphysical problem.' He looked up quickly as if there was something

encouraging in this reflection. 'An interesting metaphysical problem. I remember a colleague of yours' – he glanced at Winter – 'a New College man and a most distinguished philosopher' – he turned to the gravely attentive Toplady – 'putting a very pretty question. Just what is the metaphysical status of a wild animal encountered in a dream? If the dream is vivid or terrifying then there is an obvious sense in which the creature in it is more *real* than any similar creature observed in the security of the zoo. And the same problem attaches to the creatures of the world of words as to the creatures of the world of dreams. What is their status?'

From the corridor came some casual sound. Winter found himself starting and glancing half-fearfully out. Fanciful talk in return for fanciful talk – only behind this talk of his host's was the pressure of urgent thought. The Spider was indeed stirring, if only in his creator's mind; was asserting himself as something mysteriously more and other than the sum of the words from which he had been built up. His footstep – less solid perhaps than a mortal's, yet not heard by an inner ear alone – might even now be echoing down some farther corridor of the train; his eye might be bent curiously on Bussenschutt, be frowning at Mrs Birdwire's dogs. Winter, who had no fancy for notions of this sort, found that he had to brace his mind to get rid of them.

'Yesterday', continued Mr Eliot, 'I happened to see the porter at my club for the first time in nearly a year. What has he been doing in the interval? Nobody will doubt for a moment that he has been there at the club and going steadily about his job. But consider Iago or Mr Micawber, creatures incomparably more vital than our

porter. What happens when I cease to think of *them*? I sometimes wonder—' Mr Eliot broke off, appeared to take a long breath. 'The problem is a teasing one and perhaps it is just as well that it is a metaphysical problem merely.' He brought out his pipe again and stuffed it with what was to Winter a deliberately steady hand. 'I mean that there is no practical problem; these different modes of being never collide. The real world into which we are given and the imaginative world to which our words can give: both perhaps are dreams and they flow, unmingling, side by side.' He struck a match and the little spurt of flame lit up a face which was questioning and absorbed. 'But what', said Mr Eliot, 'if, after all, there may come a point at which the two dreams cross?'

Once more the train jerked to a stop. With a shade of uncharacteristic fuss Timmy began handing his companions their possessions. 'Rust,' he said. 'Let's nip out before the Birdwire pack.'

Winter, who was grateful for the diversion, jammed on his hat and prepared for undignified haste. He was halted by the finger of Mr Eliot – an aerial and floating finger, raising itself with the suddenly renewed buoyancy of a submarine. 'In these matters', said Mr Eliot, 'there is a technique to be observed.' He smiled and – as if years had been ripped from him – the smile was Timmy's. 'In taxis one jumps in at one door and out at the other. From trains one gets off at the wrong side. And so one eludes – or, if one believes in English, dodges – pursuit. Such manoeuvres are perennially pleasing.' He looked about the compartment. 'Timmy, I can't believe that you really needed to bring such a big suitcase. Winter and Toplady are going to have much less trouble.'

And Mr Eliot – the particular Mr Eliot, Winter felt, who was in charge at the moment – threw open the door beside him and dropped with confidence to the line. Toplady, not without one longing lingering look at the orthodoxy of corridor and platform behind, followed; Winter went next; Timmy stayed to hand down the luggage. In a minute they were all standing in a siding between some sacks of bone ash and a truck-load of pigs. Mr Eliot, on whom the scramble and the cold air – it may have been – had produced once more a delicate glow, inspected the pigs. ‘Gloucester Old Spots,’ he told Toplady; ‘probably my neighbour Gregory’s.’ He glanced round the siding. ‘I think we’ll make for Laslett’s barn.’ They trudged down the siding; from behind them a rising river of sound indicated that Mrs Birdwire and Lady Pike had begun to disembogue. ‘I’m sorry,’ said Mr Eliot, ‘that it’s raining so hard.’

For quite suddenly it was raining very hard indeed. Winter hoped that Laslett’s barn was near at hand. His trousers were flapping wetly against his calves. He read commiseration as well as cautious amusement in the look of a young porter who was respectfully touching his cap to Mr Eliot’s curious procession. Toplady, he conjectured, was carrying on a parenthetical debate with himself as to whether he might usefully stop to put up his umbrella. Timmy had gripped his hat between his teeth and was experimenting with carrying his streaming suitcase on his head.

‘I myself,’ said Mr Eliot, ‘prefer Lincolnshire Curly Coated.’ He took Toplady’s arm in a friendly way. ‘You will say at once that they are coarse in the bone, but I reply that they are exceptionally hardy and prolific. And in pigs at least’ – from

under dripping eyebrows Mr Eliot glanced innocently at Winter – ‘to be prolific is to possess the ultimate virtue.’

They trudged on. The rain, driven by a veering wind, drifted about them in washes of grey, pattered on their hats, exploded on the rusty metals between which they were walking. Winter, changing his bag from one hand to the other, unwarily stubbed his chilled toes on a sleeper. ‘I usually advise the tenants’, said Mr Eliot, ‘to cross them with Large White. I think we had better climb under here. Be careful of the barbed wire. It is a dreadfully expensive kind and claims to have an extra spike. But most of them prefer Large Black. This is the barn. When the coast is clear we can send Timmy to reconnoitre and probably he will find that someone has come down with a car. How careless Laslett is with grain.’ Laslett’s carelessness, Winter guessed, was to be inferred from an immense flock of sparrows garrisoning the barn. The birds rose up in a cloud of dust and chaff and agitated droppings as they entered; a moment later they had vanished into the rain. ‘It seems rather hard to turn them out,’ said Mr Eliot. ‘But no doubt they will come back.’

Winter dumped his suitcase end up near the door, sat on it, and from this position contemplated his host anew. About twenty minutes before he had been entertaining for Mr Eliot sentiments of remorse and commiseration; now he noted that his attitude held something of the mild suspicion with which he was sometimes impelled to regard Mr Eliot’s son. The rural Mr Eliot – the Mr Eliot who bought barbed wire and held convictions on the nuptials of Gloucester Old Spots – had appeared with disconcerting

promptness the moment the party touched earth – with something of the slick synchronization, indeed, of a refined manufacturing process. Behind this Mr Eliot there had been, momentarily, the Mr Eliot whose professional concern was with the devices of melodrama, and who was willing to indulge himself with a prank from his own stock-in-trade. And behind this again was the Mr Eliot on whom Timmy proposed to let loose Dr Herbert Chown: a Mr Eliot who was being led by untoward happenings to entertain disturbing notions on the relations of the imaginary and the actual. This, Winter reflected, was the interesting Mr Eliot, the embarrassing Mr Eliot, and conceivably the dangerous Mr Eliot as well. There had of course been a further Mr Eliot: the amiable antiquarian who was the proud father of Belinda. Perhaps there had been others who flitted by unnoticed; certainly there were too many Mr Eliots for comfort.

At this point Winter's reflections were interrupted by an icy and spear-like sensation in the back; a moment later this resolved itself into a moist trickling down his spine. He glanced up at the roof and a further aggregation of raindrops caught him on the nose.

'I am afraid', said Mr Eliot, 'that the roof leaks. When I come to think of it, Laslett has complained more than once. And I believe that I replied most dogmatically that the roof *couldn't* leak. How liable one is to take up rash a-prioristic positions.'

Winter wondered if Laslett would get his roof repaired, or if Mr Eliot regarded the impact of experience as adequately met with a philosophic aphorism. He stood up and joined Toplady, who was peering through the door.

'I think', said Toplady, 'that we must expect an unsettled weekend.' He gave Winter a meaningful look which unflatteringly underlined the subtlety of this remark. Then he lowered his voice. 'Ought we to have come? You know what I myself chiefly feel, and really at this particular moment as I have never done, is the sheer stretch of time between Friday's luncheon and Monday's breakfast.'

Winter looked at his watch. 'Is there to be a Friday's luncheon?'

'If only we could arrive I should imagine a good one. Our friends don't seem anywhere very much *à l'étroit*. I suppose all those books must have made something like a fortune. And that must so definitely add to the disconcertingness of the present situation, don't you think? Imagine' – said Toplady with real feeling – 'uncanny things happening to one's bonds and dividend warrants.'

'I find it difficult enough to imagine uncanny things happening to Eliot's manuscripts. It wouldn't surprise me if that part of the story were Timmy's imagination.'

Toplady glanced cautiously behind him. 'Timmy is certainly rather eccentric. I suppose that in his family it is more or less the thing. Last term, for instance, he did something very odd. He sent me a long series of sonnets.'

'Sonnets?'

'I can't think why. I'm not really interested in poetry and didn't feel at all competent to criticize.' Toplady looked with mild doubt at Winter. 'And I discovered that last year he sent just the same poems to a man at Balliol – a black man.'

'Dear me.'

'So he really is rather unaccountable. But I don't think he would romance about his father's embarrassments. And I don't think you will disagree with me when I say that whatever the facts that we should so much like to know about more exactly may be they do constitute a situation of a delicacy to be tactfully approached if at all.'

'Yes,' said Winter.

'I thought,' continued Toplady conscientiously, 'that what you discussed in the train, though you won't suspect that I question its interest to people who are interested in that sort of thing – among whom no doubt Mr Eliot himself might be guessed to be – led rather unfortunately perhaps–'

'I agree', said Winter, 'with what you are in process of saying.' Cautiously he stuck his head out of the barn. Near at hand he imagined that he had heard the purr of a motor-car.

'Timmy said', said Toplady, 'that you were confident you could solve–'

Winter interrupted brusquely. 'That at least was Timmy's nonsense. I'm quite sure I shall solve nothing. Nor you either.'

Toplady did not dispute this perhaps unnecessary thrust. 'Then I wish', he said stolidly, 'we might find a person who could.'

Somebody was whistling. A little falling melody, at once limp and luxurious like the recital of a neurotic symptom, ebbed about the barn. There was an interval of silence and the phrases were repeated – so carefully that it became evident that the interval had been given to their

dispassionate appraisal. This time the melody was taken a little farther, slowing down as it moved. There was another considering pause and the theme was dismissed – decisively sped on its way with a couple of bars from the overture to *Figaro*. ‘Excuse me,’ said a voice. ‘Are you with Mr Eliot?’

Winter and Toplady turned round. The figure of a girl, enveloped in a raincoat which was much too big for her, had appeared at a corner of the barn. At the same moment Mr Eliot came forward from behind them. ‘My dear Patricia,’ he cried, ‘however did you hunt us down?’

The girl called Patricia stepped into the barn and sent a shower of raindrops tossing from her bare head. ‘I noticed the sparrows,’ she said, ‘and worked it out for myself.’

Mr Eliot, at once wet and faintly luminous like a corposant or a fragment of Greek fire, performed introductions. ‘This is Mr Winter, Timmy’s tutor – and this is his friend, Hugo Toplady. Our rescuer is Patricia Appleby.’

Miss Appleby knit conventional murmurs to a glance which was frankly appraising. ‘Belinda sent me,’ she told Mr Eliot, ‘and I promised that in fifteen minutes you should lunch. So come along. You must be hungry. Though I expect’ – and she looked for the first time at Timmy – ‘you’ve been having boiled sweets to keep body and soul together.’

‘Chocolate,’ said Mr Eliot cheerfully.

‘It used to be boiled sweets. Webster, it’s ages since we met.’

For a second they eyed each other like shy and wary savages. Timmy's reply, it was pleasant to observe, was an unwonted mumble; he edged a little nearer to Toplady. The girl – she was slight and in a sharply chiselled way beautiful – pushed a wet wisp of hair behind an ear and the movement brought up a chin more decided than Timmy's own. 'You've grown,' she said and wheeled briskly to the others.

Timmy had no doubt grown. But in their second of life the physical statement and the swerve away had held a challenge as direct and primordial as hide-and-seek in Eden. Winter was abruptly conscious that for this weekend he was on leave from a cloister. He turned to Mr Eliot. 'I am old', he said, 'and labour after vanities.'

Mr Eliot, glowing faintly in the dusk of the barn, meditated for a moment. Then for plainly he liked to catch an implication – he shone positively lambent. 'But at least', he said, 'there is luncheon. Patricia – the car.' And Winter followed the others into the rain, plunged in sudden and treacherous gloom.

The car, sleekly streaming like a pachyderm, was standing by the side of the barn. It was big and new; Queen Anne's white showed no scratch or stain; and inside the air was warm and dry. Winter, climbing in beside Miss Appleby, wondered idly to what extent his host was wedded to such gifts of the Spider. There was every indication that life at Rust Hall was, in Toplady's phrase, by no means *à l'étroit*. But then a large part of our total human effort is directed at dumping abounding commodities and services on the rich and the process – unlike Lady Pike and Mrs Birdwire – is one which the rich are unable to dodge by odd manoeuvres in trains. To

be showy must be, for the rich man, the line of least resistance; to be lavish to the satisfaction of others without being loud to a point distressing to himself must be a very considerable study. Mr Eliot perhaps bought the cars that were thought good for him and let his own taste for quiet and informed elegance spread itself in the paint.

'It isn't', said Patricia Appleby, as if approximately aware of Winter's line of thought, 'my sort of car. But it seems to manage itself. Do you notice how when one does this' – and she trod on the accelerator – 'it hits you gently but firmly in the back?' They swooped between high dripping hedges like a leaf before a gale. 'And the only sound is from the tyres.'

'Are you', asked Winter – who took a little time to adjust himself to conversation with young women – 'keen on cars?'

'Keen on cars?' Miss Appleby's hands went smoothly over the controls and they slowed down, slid accurately round a sharp bend, miraculously avoided a half-drowned dog, and leapt ahead once more with terrifying acceleration. 'Not a bit.' They ran on in silence for a minute and took another corner so that Winter found himself pressing hard against the floorboards with his feet. In the back Timmy was chattering excitedly to Toplady about a landscape invisible behind curtains of rain; Mr Eliot, subdued perhaps by a consciousness of the prodigal party awaiting him, huddled unnoticeably in his corner. 'Belinda and Timmy and I', said Miss Appleby, as if feeling that some remark less negative than her last would be polite, 'were at school together. But I haven't seen Timmy since – nor much of Belinda until we

got a job together not long ago. Do you believe in co-education?’

In the common-room one’s faiths are seldom challenged in this simple way. ‘I really don’t know,’ said Winter. ‘But the system seems to produce very charming–’

Miss Appleby trod on the accelerator to the extent of annihilating what he realized to be a fatuous compliment. ‘I,’ she said, ‘do. Were you ever in a women’s college?’

‘Not effectively.’

‘It doesn’t march. Me-he! There her lily snaps.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘*The Spanish Cloister* – poem.’

‘Oh, yes. But, after all, *his* lily. And I’m sure the malice of the monastery is fully as robust as that of the nunnery. It would be nice, though, to offer Oxford a very great sum of money if it would establish a co-educational college. I can just imagine my colleague Horace Benton–’

‘Horace Benton?’ said Miss Appleby. ‘I sent him a telegram this morning.’

‘Or old Mummery–’

‘Mummery? I sent him one too.’ She glanced at him curiously. ‘I’m afraid’, she said formally, ‘I didn’t quite catch your name.’

‘Winter.’

‘How very odd.’

‘Odd?’

She shook her head. ‘I oughtn’t to have mentioned it. A breach’ – she shook her eyes from the road and glanced at him in ironical

solemnity – ‘of professional confidence. And here we are.’

The car swept through lodge gates and purred up a drive.

Mr Eliot’s proceedings at Rust station had been curiously paralleled by Dr Bussenschutt at the junction. For Dr Bussenschutt like Mr Eliot was determined on an unobtrusive exit; only his method was a little different and in keeping with the dignity of his position. To the porter who came to pick up his bags Bussenschutt said briefly, ‘Hide them.’

‘Beg pardon, sir?’

‘My good man, I am concerned to elude observation. Hide them.’ Bussenschutt disbursed what he judged to be a sufficient sum of money, took a curious view of Mr Eliot’s guests stowing themselves in the cream cars, took a further and cautious glance at another big car waiting across the yard, and retired with a pile of books to a lavatory. He allowed himself a ten minutes’ respite with the *Journal of Classical Archaeology* and then returned doggedly to *Little Grains of Sand*. Thoroughness had been the keynote of his career. The quarrel with his colleague Mummery dated from the occasion on which Mummery had informed him, to the accompaniment of a significant snort, that thoroughness was too often a poor substitute for logic.

Bussenschutt’s travels had been almost exclusively in the realms of gold. Sometimes he had conducted bands of fellow Hellenists around the glory that was Greece; more commonly he had traversed the same ground within the four walls of his library. Reading *Little Grains of Sand*,

which was Mrs Birdwire's account of wanderings in Central Australia, he was appalled that such places should exist, and yet further appalled that they could be celebrated in so excruciating a prose. Nevertheless he read attentively to the end. Then he took another fortifying swig of archaeology and turned to the next volume. Before leaving Oxford he had equipped himself with the complete works of Mrs Birdwire from Mr Blackwell's bookshop.

It was to be noticed that all Mrs Birdwire's narratives began and ended in an old English garden. The substance of the book might concern Esquimaux or Bantu, the Loire or the Limpopo, bull-fighting or Arctic exploring. But always this garden lay tranquilly at either end, crowded with flowers that bade the departing traveller a thousand fragrant farewells, paraded by dogs whose business it was to recognize their much-enduring mistress and welcome her boisterously home. Dr Bussenschutt, who knew nothing of horticulture, felt that he must give the flowers the benefit of a doubt. But of the dogs he found that he strongly disapproved; the thing had been done with greater effect and economy in the *Odyssey*. So he skipped the next garden, wrapped his overcoat about him, and sailed with Mrs Birdwire for Tango Island. On Tango, it appeared, the inhabitants were allowed a bottle of whisky per head on Monday mornings; on Thursdays, Friday, and Saturdays the Administrator gave garden parties with a running buffet; and on Sundays the Bishop of Tango-Tango gave an entertainment at the conclusion of divine service. Mrs Birdwire had been impressed and moved by the loyalty of the people of Tango to the imperial idea. Bussenschutt, unimpressed, closed the book and got up to reconnoitre.

The local train had departed, as had the large car which had been awaiting Mr Shoon's guest in the station yard. Bussenschutt emerged on the platform, took a turn up and down in fugitive sunshine, and summoned his porter. 'Get me', he said, 'a substantial ham sandwich and a quiet taxi-cab.' The confidence of his demand would have done credit to Mrs Birdwire herself addressing a band of Sherpas, Fellaheen, or Caribs; the sandwich appeared and Bussenschutt consumed it while continuing his perambulation and studying a map. The taxi shortly followed and gave substantial evidence of quietude; its driver was an ancient person in a smock. 'Good day to you, my master', said Bussenschutt, whose manner on rural excursions became markedly old-world, 'are you well furnished with fuel?'

The driver, having subjected this enquiry to some species of mental interpretation, answered that he was all right.

'I am going to Shoon Abbey. But first I propose to take the air. Drive me' – he consulted his map – 'to Little Limber.' He superintended the disposal of his bags and climbed in. 'Proceed', he commanded, 'at a moderate pace. I am engaged in study.'

The taxi crawled through England – an England which was wintry, wet, and beautiful under November. The evergreens were burnished by the rain and their berries a dark fire; stubble still alternated with the ploughlands and spread its dull gold beneath the flight of the redwings; oak and ash stripped themselves like athletes against the sky as their fading wealth of autumn passed away; the sun, coming and going amid rain clouds that were drawing in, reared to the north

the fragmentary rainbow of Constable or Crome. But to these lovely and elevating appearances Bussenschutt was blind; his ear, too, was sealed against the pheasants and the fieldfares. He had pitched *Little Grains of Sand*, together with the book on Tango Island, into the ditch, and was concentrating his mind on *Minarets, Monasteries, and Myself*. When the taxi eventually stopped he looked about him with a frown. 'My good fellow,' he said distastefully, 'what wretched hamlet is this?'

'Little Limber, sir – the same you asked to be driven to.'

'Ah! Proceed' – Bussenschutt glanced abstractedly at his map – 'to Pigg.'

'Pigg, sir? We came through Pigg not fifteen minutes back.' The ancient person driving was aggrieved. Had his fare displayed a passing interest in the countryside he would have put him down as a harmless urban eccentric. But he objected to being employed for purposes offensive to human reason.

'My physician', said Bussenschutt readily, 'has prescribed carriage-exercise. Proceed to Pigg.' Mrs Birdwire, he had just read, was skilled in gaining access to the less familiar institutions of the Near East by disguising herself as a eunuch.

The ancient person unwillingly circled the village green of Little Limber and set his bonnet towards Pigg. A shower had been and gone, leaving the air remotely pungent with earth; flocks of finches swept across a sky whose grey was faintly green and faintly blue. But Bussenschutt continued to read at his normal pace of a hundred and eighty pages an hour. Camels, it appeared, had an inordinate affection

for Mrs Birdwire. They nuzzled. Bussenschutt remembered that this was behaviour hitherto ascribed to the dogs in the epilogues. He turned on. The dogs in the epilogue to *Minarets, Monasteries, and Myself* fawned.

‘Pigg, sir.’

Bussenschutt looked up from his book. ‘Pigg revisited’, he said with jocularly. ‘You may now proceed to the Abbey, my master, but let your route be by Snug.’

The driver was past expostulation. He made a note to raise his fare by threepence a mile, circled the village green of Pigg, drove steadily on and through Little Limber, turned off down a winding lane.

‘Stay!’ said Bussenschutt suddenly. ‘Whose is that curious house on the hill?’

‘Belongs to a Mrs Birdwire, sir.’

‘Mrs Birdwire? How more’ – Bussenschutt was quite superfluously mendacious – ‘than strange. And that is her carriage drive?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Bussenschutt glanced at his watch. ‘My friends at the Abbey’, he said, ‘must wait. Mrs Birdwire and I have been all over the globe together and it is only proper that I should call.’ He closed *Minarets, Monasteries, and Myself* and pitched it over a hedge. ‘Drive up.’

Introduced into the dining-room at the tail-end of a meal, Winter had the feeling that it had all happened before. Among this crowd, engorging with just this animation and just this unconsciousness of the fundamental oddity of the process these very custards and pastries, he had come at this very moment long ago.

One's first reaction to a feeling of this sort is to see to what details it will stretch. Winter looked to his left and saw a sweet omelette which was certainly part of the picture; he looked before him and saw a plate of soup with the same distant but piercing familiarity; he looked to his right and saw a meringue – and with the meringue the illusion broke down. He must, he thought, be tired; for it is fatigue that plays this disconcerting trick. One's awareness flickers momentarily so that a scene slips past unnoticed to the region of memory, from which it instantly rebounds with the quality of reminiscence and jostles with the direct impressions of a second later. Perhaps the most disconcerting of all approximately normal tricks of the mind. Dr Herbert Chown, whose frequently publicized features he distinguished some way down the table, would call it paramnesia...

Winter, obscurely disturbed, remembered his dream of the night before. In sleep he had moved through just this babble of sound, this ceaseless semi-automatic talk. The only difference was that

the chattering in his dreams had been the chattering of dons, whereas this was the chattering of people who chattered a pitch higher and two shades louder – and who made rather more noise too with glasses and forks and spoons. Mr Eliot's dining-room, during the dubious celebrations now in progress, was not altogether unsuggestive of another dream: the nightmare of being back at school. The table was almost as long; the mental age of those about it was not perhaps very different; only – Winter thankfully acknowledged – the soup was wholly of another world.

A variation on these thoughts he decided to exploit for the purpose of adding his own necessary contribution to the hubbub. He turned to the meringue. 'Like most fundamentally childish people', he said gravely, 'I have a lurking conviction that they should never have let me leave school – and a resulting terror that they may send me back. Did you ever read Storer Clourston's *The Prodigal Father*? It's about a very respectable Edinburgh lawyer who begins to grow younger instead of older. A finely macabre conception. To be Peter Pan and never to grow up – that is a state of affairs we see about us everywhere. But to be receding slowly and helplessly towards the indignity of the cradle...the thought would have done credit to the author of the *Inferno*. Don't you think?' Having delivered himself of this address Winter glanced at the meringue's destination. He saw a silvery old lady, wearing a hat rather like a stoutly-made bird's nest high on her head, and round her neck a lace net of the sort which has to be supported on a series of miniature bone fencing-posts. The old lady nodded vigorously – so vigorously that Winter almost expected a startled flight of birds

to issue from the hat – and as she nodded she faintly blushed. For a moment she seemed to search for some verbal sequel to her gesture of agreement; then she took refuge instead in a quite unsuitably large chunk of meringue. Apparently she was not one of the talkers and Winter turned to the sweet omelette. This time he tried something simpler. 'It is', he said, 'a most animated party.' The point of the chatter in his dream, he remembered, was the distraction it presented to the task of getting a problem straight. And looking round him now he felt convinced that the milieu of Rust Hall would not be all congenial to the thoughtful elucidation of mysteries. 'I'm afraid', he added, 'I know hardly any of them.'

'The gathering', said the man who was eating a sweet omelette, 'is unique. It represents one of the great romances of modern publishing enterprise.' He was a large man dressed in loose-fitting lovat tweed and from beneath oddly mischievous eyes he spoke with a large pomposity. 'Consider', he went on – and it was plain to Winter that he was of the talking kind – 'consider any twenty books sold in England. Lamentable though the confession be, it is most certain that six are merely bad. And six, without being bad, are openly dull. It is only the remaining eight which can be said to give pleasure to their readers, and of these–' the large man made a dramatic gesture up the table – 'two are by our host.'

Winter said that this was a remarkable thing.

'It *is* a remarkable thing,' said the large man. 'The more so in that the commodity has been perfectly steady on the market for a considerable term of years.' He puffed himself out as he spoke

with a frog-like effect which was enhanced by his hanging green tweeds. 'It is a labour of beneficence with which I am proud to be associated.' He made another gesture – this time of the weighty sort which Winter conjecturally associated with company directors at shareholders' meetings. And then, unaccountably, he broke into a rumbling guffaw and turned away to his farther neighbour.

The old lady, fortified by her meringue, now summoned up courage to speak. 'I'm afraid', she said. 'that introductions are never thought necessary at this party. You don't know Mr Wedge? His imitations are most amusing, don't you think?'

'His imitations?'

'Of all the other publishers. That was Sir Richard Fell whom he was imitating just now. I've never met Sir Richard, but I'm sure it was done to the life. May I be very unconventional and say that I am Mrs Moule? You will sometimes see my name in *teeny* letters on the playbills.'

Winter made sounds suggesting that the teeny letters had often been very much in his eye. 'My name is Winter,' he added.

Mrs Moule spent some seconds evidently trying to place a Winter somewhere among the myrmidons of the Spider. Failing, she asked, 'And you don't know many people here?' She hesitated, blushed faintly, and added in a burst of resolution, 'Are you the detective?'

Startled, Winter swallowed a bolus of fish. 'I am afraid not. If long life is granted me I shall be called a classical archaeologist. It is a poking about sort of business which might help me to turn detective if need was. May I ask why—'

Mrs Moule was covered with faintly pink confusion. 'I am so sorry. You must forgive me. I believe that some policemen now are quite – But it was most stupid. You see I know that a detective is being brought down' – she sank her voice to a whisper – '*quietly.*'

'Quite a number of people seem to being brought down quietly.'

The old lady looked at Winter at once apprehensively and absently; it occurred to him that she was no longer using her eyes but her ears – straining them after something beyond and apart from the loud chatter about them. 'Have you ever', she asked presently, 'rifled a tomb?'

'I'm afraid I've never succeeded in walking off with any substantial treasure. But I have dug about a bit here and there.'

'Oh, dear! I know I use the wrong words. But you have explored tombs' – Mrs Moule's voice took on an awesome quality – '*in Egypt?*'

'Yes – in an amateur fashion. It's out of a classical man's way.'

'Have you ever come under a curse?'

'Decidedly not.'

'One doesn't', said Mrs Moule darkly, 'always know.'

'Dear me, I hope you haven't yourself any experience of such a state of affairs?' Winter looked at Mrs Moule and saw that this civil enquiry had been a mistake. Briskly accepting another meringue, she spoke of auras and astral bodies, of emanations, reincarnations and ectoplasmic manifestations, of the Great Pyramid, and of uncanny happenings in haunted

places and darkened rooms. She spoke of the Great Memory and of the Higher Thought; she spoke of the popular superstitions of the Highlands and of the esoteric knowledge of the East; she marshalled within the uncertain outlines of her argument a whole lower mythology of supernatural beings; creatures of the fire and the air, the diminished fairies and the still-potent Sidhe, the dark divinities of Mexico and the brutish gods of Nile. Mrs Moule, it seemed to Winter, had a lively, roomy, and wholly undisciplined mind. Her present line of talk was not an obsession; it represented the turning out of one of a series of untidy lumber-rooms on an impulse not yet revealed. It was a safe guess that the same obscure events which had prompted Mr Eliot's more sophisticated mind to metaphysical discussion were behind his assistant's dallyings with the frankly spooky.

Something of these events Winter knew, but much remained obstinately shadowy. He determined on a calculated attack. 'The whole subject of the uncanny is certainly fascinating. And uncommonly good material for imaginative writing. When you come to think of it all the world's great stories have an element of the supernatural. Its abandonment means the sacrifice of a great many good story-telling effects. Is Mr Eliot's the sort of mind that is given to the supernatural? Is there anything of the true supernatural in his books?'

Mrs Moule considered. 'There is a ghost in *The Crimson Web*. But he turns out to be the dismissed butler, who has been living secretly in the wine-cellar and who wanders about the house at night in an intoxicated condition. And that is the general rule. Supernatural appearances are

permissible for the purpose of giving a momentary thrill but there must be a naturalistic explanation of them in the end. The essence of the thing is that the reader or playgoer has to feel safe.'

For a moment Winter forgot that he was circuitously in quest of information. The old lady was intelligent. 'Safe?' he said.

'The supernatural has no known rules, and nowadays we are comfortable only with rules. If we are to play our stereotyped games or make our engines work or keep fit we must follow the rules. Mr Eliot's later books are successful because everything is subject to rules which the reader knows. There is generally a puzzle which the reader can solve by means of the rules – and that implies that in the little universe of the book the reader is master. The books – though the reader is hardly aware of it – cater for the need of security. Real life is horribly insecure because God is capable of keeping a vital rule or two up his sleeve and giving us unpleasant surprises as a result. Mr Eliot isn't allowed to do that. In a puzzle-book the surprises are always pleasing because it is implied that our intelligence is really superior to them. Knowing the rules, we can control them if we want to.'

More than curious, thought Winter, that this competent old person, so admirably chosen to second Mr Eliot in what Wedge called his labours of beneficence, should also be capable of talking nonsense about Higher Thought and astral bodies. 'Those hidden rules which Eliot isn't allowed to exploit', he said; '–you think God keeps some of them in the Great Pyramid? And brings them out, perhaps, to persecute our host?'

At this question Mrs Moule, who had been talking briskly and with spirit, raised a nervous hand to the little palisade round her throat. Involuntarily, or by policy, she was once more a timorously tongue-tied old lady – a schoolmistress who had made her way into the world without ever quite gaining confidence in the face of it. And once more she appeared to be listening for something which was no part of a common luncheon party: so powerful was the suggestion of this that Winter found his own ear straining for he knew not what.

‘You see,’ prompted Winter presently, ‘though not a detective I have been brought down to be introduced to a mystery. The tip of it keeps appearing and disappearing in rather an annoying way. Timmy Eliot, though he seems seriously concerned, enjoys wrapping the mystery in mystification. Eliot himself hitches it to metaphysics and you seem to hitch it to magic. As a newcomer with more or less an objective view I see an elaborate and possibly purposeful practical joke. If only the thing were brought forward and inspected, so to speak, we might be able to decide who was right.’

Mrs Moule was looking increasingly nervous. ‘Mr Winter, you have *heard* – ?’

‘Part of the story – yes.’

‘Oh – the story.’ The old lady seemed slightly relieved. She considered; braced herself. ‘Mr Winter,’ she said solemnly, ‘there have been *manifestations*.’ The bird’s nest nodded resolutely. ‘The whole truth is in that. If you are incapable of believing in such things – and I know very well that nowadays many of the best minds are – the whole truth will elude you. You might as well not

have come down. A spirit, a spirit connected with – with the books, is abroad in this house. I *know*.'

'Dear me, you sound most positive. You mean you have seen–'

'I have *seen*', said Mrs Moule with faint emphasis, 'nothing.' She paused, slightly changed the subject. 'You have heard about the manuscripts? Certain of Mr Eliot's manuscripts have been–'

'Rewriting themselves. I know. But really rewriting themselves in holograph? Or just retyping themselves? It is that sort of thing that is important. And before I acknowledge that there was a spirit at work I should want to know quite a lot about locks and keys.'

For a moment Mrs Moule appeared to be endeavouring to take this commonplace point of view. Then she laid her hand on Winter's sleeve. 'I *know*', she said, 'that there is danger, real danger, in this house. Something is being prepared. Disaster. A trap.' Her blush came and went. 'I know this is the language I spend my days throwing into stage dialogue. But that is the point. It is our own imaginings, our own stock-in-trade, being brought to bear against us. The subtlety is in that.'

'I agree. But the subtlety, surely, of an idle flesh-and-blood joker – and one probably with no very sinister ends in view.'

'Mr Winter, do you know just *how* the manuscripts have been rewriting themselves?'

'According to Timmy the effect has been of this chief character – the Spider – changing his mind and determining to go his own way.'

Mrs Moule nodded. 'That is the outline.' She hesitated. 'I don't really know if I'm entitled to tell you more.' She looked at him so sharply that for a moment he felt positively uncomfortable. 'But I will. I feel I must justify what I have said: that there is peril at Rust Hall.'

'Peril,' said a cheerful voice. 'That reminds me.'

It was not, Winter repeated to himself, a milieu for the thoughtful elucidation of mysteries. He looked glumly at the publisher Wedge.

'It reminds me,' said Wedge, 'of how I must hold myself accountable for all this mass of political publishing. Mrs Moule, did I ever tell you about that?'

Mrs Moule, who was perhaps glad of a respite, assured him that he had not.

'It was like this. I never do anything of that sort myself; nevertheless I set the ball rolling. It was with a series of scissors-and-paste poetry books in awful neo-Victorian plush bindings. I called them Gems and they were a great success.' He gave Winter a quick appraising glance. 'I don't expect that at Oxford or Cambridge the demand was exactly heavy, but in the great world the sales were all that I could wish. You know Andrew Urchart?'

Without cordiality Winter acknowledged having met Andrew Urchart at a party.

'Andrew is smart enough. He knows' – Wedge grinned complacently – 'where and for how long to follow. He rang up one of his young men and told him to get busy on a series of Pearls. Only Andrew is Scotch.'

Winter and Mrs Moule stared blankly.

'Andrew being Scotch, it came about that the young man set to work on a series of *Perils*. He began, naturally, with the Red Peril and then he did the Yellow Peril and the Brown Peril. Andrew thought he might as well put them out and the Perils beat the Gems hollow.'

Mrs Moule laughed with unexpected robustness. Winter agreed to be moderately amused.

'And that', continued Wedge seriously, 'set the fashion and we have this spate of political stuff. The Perils were such a success that when Andrew's young man ran out of more or less authentic material he took to inventing. For instance, there was the Gamboge Peril – some frightfully reactionary movement in Monaco. And the Ultra-Violet Peril...hullo, people appear to be moving.' He stood up. 'Cultured Perils, as you might say.'

A wise-crack the richer, thought Winter, but otherwise not much forwarder.

In an indeterminate room, which might have suggested to an observer sufficiently acute that its owner was both a widower and a widower with a favourite daughter, he took fuller stock of the party. Mrs Moule had been snatched away from him – possibly at the point of revelation; in a deep window recess which looked chilly but was actually nicely warmed by electric pipes she was listening to a small man with a beard. The beard was of the convoluted and incredible kind with which the French are familiar in advertisements of aids to beardedness; it agitated itself rapidly in close proximity to Mrs Moule's face; and across that face the blushes came and went with the

regularity of the less complicated species of neon sign. Winter conjectured that the monologue was scandalous and refrained from breaking in. His second neighbour at the luncheon table was in the centre of a little crowd by a fireplace at the far end of the room; Winter could just see him rubbing his hands together and intermittently standing on one leg: presumably he was engaged in another of his celebrated imitations. Securing a cup of coffee from Belinda Eliot, Winter retired comfortably to a corner.

There were the Eliots. Belinda, with whom he had exchanged only a word, had a tip-tilted nose dwarfed by large round glasses which were in turn overshadowed by a high and bumpy forehead. To this appearance, which accorded with early printers' devices substantially enough, she joined an air of practical calculation which seemed at the moment to be directed at her brother. Timmy was still clinging to his Hugo, and his Hugo's cautiously wandering glance could be interpreted as searching the room for the right sort of old school tie. The human species is absurdly dependent on the eye, a fact which creates the subtle hierarchy of tailors and milliners. What Toplady stood really in need of in this unfamiliar environment was the primitive simplicity of a nose.

Winter looked for his host. Mr Eliot was moving about among his guests with the meticulous but unconvincing cordiality of one whose person would fain follow his thoughts elsewhere. At the moment he was shaking hands with Dr Chown in what Winter conjectured to be only the most evanescent surprise; no doubt he had a kindly feeling for even an unaccountable guest who had no stake in the fortunes of the Spider. An

agreeable little man, Mr Eliot – as those who carry something of their childhood with them commonly are. Winter was glad to be unconvinced by Mrs Moule's presagement of traps and disasters to come. It occurred to him to wonder who could be responsible for the project – mentioned by Mrs Moule – of bringing down a detective. Mr Eliot himself, though clearly disturbed, appeared to be thinking along lines not altogether different from his assistant's – only he talked about metaphysical problems where the old lady talked of astral planes. He had shown no consciousness that he was simply being played a troublesome joke; and, besides, Timmy had explained that from real-life detectors of crime his father had a comprehensible if nice-minded aversion. Perhaps Timmy, with Herbert Chown safely at Rust, was adding yet another string to his bow. Or perhaps Belinda –

'Excuse me,' said a voice. 'I don't think I know you.'

The voice had made an observation; it had also – if with disarming naivety – passed judgement. Winter bowed. 'I am Gerald Winter, an archaeologist.'

'I,' said the stranger, 'am Peter Holme' – he appeared to hesitate for a moment between the definite and indefinite article – 'an actor. I just wanted to ask if you are interested in amateur theatricals.'

'Good lord, no. And no more are you, surely.'

Holme smiled a beautiful if rather too tender smile. 'I'm certainly not. But you see at this party I'm always expected to get something up.'

'Who expects you?'

By this question Peter Holme was much struck. 'I don't know that I've ever thought. It's something that's happened every year for years. I don't know who was at the bottom of it originally. Wedge, I expect. That man's at the bottom of darn near everything. We get up a bit of burlesque rot about the Spider – just to please old Eliot.'

'Does it please him?'

Holme looked positively startled. 'This', he said, 'is what is meant, no doubt, by bringing in new blood. And I don't know that I've ever met an archaeologist before. Come and have a drink.'

They edged through the crush and turning down a corridor found themselves in a deserted billiard-room amply decantered and cigared. 'I say', said Holme, 'what awful luck. We can have a game. Nearly always there's somebody messing about.' He sent a ball up the table and brought it to rest dead on the cushion beside him. 'I don't know that it does. Please Eliot, I mean. I'm sure it used to. But of recent years – It looks as if I'd better give you fifty.'

'You better had. It's pretty understandable, isn't it, that he should be a bit tired of the whole thing?' Winter fumbled ineptly with his cue. 'Imagine a sensitized sausage-machine. Isn't that our host? Superb sausage in February, magnificent sausage in October, and a steady demand for gem-like little sausages in between – rather a grind.'

'Well, for that matter what about me?'

'The truth about you', said Winter with rapid candour, 'is that all roads lead to Holme. But you can play billiards. Better than you can play – '

His opponent missed a shot and sighed. 'People are so often rude. But archaeologists seem to get particularly quickly off the mark. Have you ever seen me?'

'Lord, yes. Once a week at the Oxford Repertory. Do you remember *The Lady from the Sea*? And *Uncle Vanya*?'

Holme sighed more heavily and achieved a stroke of great subtlety. 'Those', he said – and he could scarcely, Winter judged, be more than twenty-six – 'were the days. But for years now I've been dogged by this damned Spider. Eliot, after all, flits from fable to fable. And they're not exactly sausages; he does have the knack of finding something new from time to time. I'm liable to be put under the wire by one fable for three hundred nights and matinées twice a week. I took *The Trapdoor* to Capetown, Jo'burg, Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, a huddle of places in New Zealand, and Brisbane. Have you ever been to Brisbane?'

'Certainly not.'

'It's hot. Do you know *The Trapdoor*? That knack of finding something new. It's set in Antarctica. The trapdoor leads down to a sort of hut cut out of the ice where some chaps are struggling to live through the long polar night. I wore the appropriate outfit, worked out for me by real explorers. I *hate* the Spider. I wish he were dead. I wish he would kill him.'

Winter shook his head. 'No good. Conan Doyle almost certainly killed his Sherlock. But he bobbed up again – if I remember aright out of a crevasse. And Mrs Moule would decidedly have no difficulty with a dead Spider. She would reincarnate him before you could wink.'

'I've won. I think we'll play five hundred up. I think' – Holme looked cautiously about the empty room – 'he *may* kill him. Seriously.'

'Will you put a fiver on it?'

Holme looked startled. 'On his killing the beast?'

'On the five hundred up.'

'I'll say I will.'

For ten minutes they played billiards with Holme mostly sitting by the wall. 'You unspeakable cad,' he said. 'You won't really make me *pay*?'

'I'll say I will... What do you mean you think he may kill him?'

Once more Holme looked cautiously round. 'You haven't heard?'

'Indeed I've heard, but in a murmuring sort of way. Perhaps you can give me a coherent account.' Winter continued to score monotonously.

'I doubt if you deserve it. But I'll try. You see—'

At this moment the door opened and Timmy and Belinda came in.

'Holme', said Winter deliberately – for he was determined not to be sidetracked again, 'thinks that your father may kill the Spider off.'

Belinda came quickly forward. 'You mean sort of retire?'

Holme, illegally sprawled upon the table, nodded. 'And concentrate on the pigs. Go out of the policeman business altogether. His helmet now shall be a hive for bees.'

'Not a chance,' said Belinda crisply. 'Think of Wedge.'

'And André and Mrs Moule and all the Americans,' said Timmy. He strolled over to a window and began to whistle softly – to whistle something that stirred obscurely in Winter's mind.

'And', said Holme, 'the managers and the film people; you come to big business there. But as I was going to tell Winter–'

'Stop!' Belinda was standing suddenly rigid by the fireplace. 'Timmy, can't you *hear*?'

Timmy's whistling stopped – and as it stopped Winter recognized the melody. It was the same that had been so consideringly repeated by the girl who had collected him from Laslett's barn. With the others he strained his ears. Timmy must have picked up the music unconsciously from the air. For faintly as if from some remote quarter of the house the little neurasthenic phrases were floating down to them...floating down, fading away. Winter recognized the instrument on its last audible note. It was a clarinet.

'The Spider and his leitmotiv,' said Holme softly. 'It's the first time *I*'ve heard them.'

Belinda was still standing quite still. Timmy had turned from the window and was making for the door. 'I'll rip this house to pieces', he cried furiously, 'if I don't–' The door opened before he reached it. He fell back in exasperated resignation. 'André,' he said. 'Lord, lord, lord.'

It was the little man with the abundant beard. 'Peter!' he cried, 'I have an idea.'

'My dear André, that sort of thing is not your line.'

André laughed delightedly. If he had heard the spectral music of seconds before he gave no sign. 'And it will be such fun! Better than last year; better than the year before—'

'Lord,' said Timmy, 'lord, lord, *lord*.'

'And better than the year before that.' André helped himself to whisky. 'At three o'clock', he said, 'how much one begins to long for tea. My idea' he hesitated before a box of particularly large cigars – 'derives from Pirandello. The curtain goes up, the play goes forward until – lo and behold! – the audience realizes that what they are watching is not exactly a play but a play within a play. My idea is that we might exploit along those lines this funny business they're all talking about. These jokes. By the way, I suppose they are jokes?' He paused fleetingly and glanced at his companions. 'Not so much a play within a play as a Spider within a Spider. As I say, if we could think something out there would be no end of fun in it. Just the thing to please your father no end.' He smiled at them: innocently, maliciously – impossible to say. 'Think it over.' He gulped his whisky and was gone.

There was an awkward pause. 'I think', said Winter dubiously, 'it was Puccini. Does it happen often?'

Timmy had gone back to the window. 'The music? I gather it's a rare and choice effect. The cream of the joke.' He turned round and faced them. 'Life's becoming not worth living. The Spider making his ghostly music off, and André making his bestial proposals on. Whatever will poor Hugo think?'

Belinda's equanimity appeared to be equally disturbed. 'Why', she cried at a tangent, 'you

should bring down that awful boyfriend just because I ask–’ She stopped, no doubt feeling very properly that this was a strictly family affair.

‘By the way’, said Winter hastily, ‘there’s something I was going to ask: Timmy’s mentioning Benton put it in my head. The girl who collected us from the station – I’ve forgotten her name–’

‘Patricia Appleby,’ said Belinda.

‘I think she said you had a job together. And she murmured very mysteriously about Benton and an old person called Mummery and myself – something about sending us telegrams.’

‘Why,’ said Belinda, ‘that’s a little joke of Shoon’s.’

‘Jasper Shoon the collector?’

‘Yes. Patricia and I work for him. I run the books and she runs the manuscripts. And as I say, Jasper is having a little joke. He had asked your Bussenschutt down for the weekend to a sort of private view of some particularly choice manuscript–’

‘Papyrus.’

‘No doubt. And as soon as he got Bussenschutt he wired invitations to several other people. He believes in what he calls stimulating academic rivalry. I expect your invitation will follow you here.’

‘This’, said Timmy, who had opened a cigar box which proved to be a cache of milk chocolate, ‘is beside the point at issue.’

Peter Holme, who had been silent for some time, flung down his cue on a settee. ‘The point at issue is decided. You don’t any of you seem to

have noticed, but I've made a break of eighty-seven and won after all. Puccini doesn't seem to disturb me.'

They stared at him incredulously. 'It's a blatant lie,' said Timmy. 'Your wretched contest reeks of dishonesty from start to finish. And now let's play one of those games with ever so many balls.' He rummaged in a cupboard.

Winter crossed to the window. It was mid-afternoon and in the sky watery light was already fading among clouds which were coming to anchor for the night. The wind had dropped. The rain, which had been driving in diagonal washes giving movement to the landscape, was now falling perpendicularly on a country which, although actually undulating, appeared to stretch out in flat, sullenly resistant lines. The immediate prospect was a balustraded terrace, its nearer corner embellished with a pedestal on which stood a small marble bull. The creature showed even in the uncertain light as a work of craft and beauty but someone had tied an open umbrella to one of its horns and it thus stood in mute indignity, dry-headed, and with the rain streaming down its slim hind quarters. The landscape, the witticism, and the horrid little tune which yet seemed to linger in the air were alike depressing; Winter turned back to find the billiard-table under a flood of soft clear light. A voice was saying, 'Then I'll mark for you.' It was Patricia Appleby's.

There had been some hitch about the game with ever so many balls and they played billiards again instead, their attention centred for a while on the slightly hypnoidal green cloth. Patricia, from the semi-darkness beyond, occasionally called the score; Timmy, when not in play,

contrived to retreat always to the other side of the room; at one point Patricia found his chocolate and he was furious at the resulting amusement. The two games, billiards and that immemorial one of which Belinda appeared to be the promoter, went forward together. A typical winter afternoon, thought Winter, among the substantial classes of England – with the children growing up, papa looking at bills in the library, tea-things beginning to chink near by, and a sizable dinner already on the march in the kitchens. Only here the bills and the dinner were all mixed up with a mob of people drifting about the house.

‘He could retire’, said Belinda, who had the trick of catching at a train of thought, ‘if he wanted to. Mr Winter, I’m afraid you are up to the neck in the family complexes. We’re glad. But do you mind?’

‘Not at all,’ said Winter uncomfortably and inadequately. Nature had not cast him, he felt, for the role of family friend.

‘Timmy will certainly have told you of the foolish and laborious business of Mrs Birdwire. It would attract him.’

‘It attracts Winter,’ said Timmy.

‘It does strike me’, explained Winter apologetically, ‘as having its funny side. Annoying, of course.’

‘She’s a most objectionable woman’ – Belinda was uncompromisingly severe – ‘and the thing was a most frightfully humiliating let-down. The funny business about the vicar and the little schoolteacher wasn’t half so bad. They are more or less reasonable beings and after a bit we got them to sit in on it and see it from our point of

view. But the Birdwire! And now André wants to make a sort of charade of it. For of course it's the loud and silly jokes that catch his fancy; not the quiet and deadly ones.' Belinda, stabbing low at her ball, nearly cut the cloth.

'If there have been quiet and deadly jokes', said Winter, 'I really would like to hear about them soberly. I think they would interest me more than the others. That music interests me. It sounds – dangerous. The Birdwire affair hurt nobody.'

'Daddy dictates.' Belinda had plunged abruptly. 'He dictates, the stuff is typed and brought to him, he scribbles over it, it is retyped and he reads it through. And that's generally the end of it, although he strikes patches where several revisions are required. Everything is kept in an enormous cupboard, unlocked, in the secretary's room. A long shelf for each of the current novels, another for short stories, and another – a bit dusty – for Pope. All these things, I say, live snug in that cupboard or did until a few weeks ago. Then they began stirring gently in the darkness.'

Impossible, thought Winter, for any Eliot to resist an alluring metaphor. Parent and children, they went out to meet the dramatic halfway. 'Stirring?' he said mildly.

'Somebody began slipping out sheets from the fair copies and substituting slightly different versions of his own.'

'His or her own,' said Timmy. 'There's a perfectly open field.'

'If we must be meticulous' – it was the voice of Patricia – 'we had better notice that Belinda has already got away from the facts and is giving a rationalistic interpretation of them; I suppose' –

the voice hesitated for a moment – ‘the only rationalistic interpretation possible. But all we really have is Mr Eliot’s and the secretary’s assertion that what came out of the cupboard wasn’t quite the same as what went in. If you think there are no other sorts of interpretation – well, ask Mrs Moule.’

‘As a matter of fact and more or less – I have.’ Winter, missing a cannon, peered into the darkness. Miss Appleby interested him.

‘I’m afraid’, said Belinda, ‘that I’m wholly rational. And so’ – the significant irrelevance seemed to slip from her – ‘is daddy, really.’

‘Or ought to be’, Holme interjected, ‘if he’s an admirer of that chap Pope. I like his verse. But it had no mystic twilight at all.’

‘Let me get on. Somebody started monkeying with the typescripts in the cupboard, ever so cautiously at first. Which suggests, when you think it out, what was being aimed at. Not just a jape or a brief nuisance but something – well, undermining. If the unknown had suddenly slipped in some considerable perversion of what daddy was writing, the thing would have declared itself as a practical joke at once. But it was so done that for a long time daddy didn’t realize. If you actually come to grips with the business’ – Belinda looked at Winter – ‘you will think us an incredibly vague lot. Things happen – like these noises off; they worry people; but nobody really sets about putting a check on them. I don’t if you’ve noticed, but my father is as vague as vague can be.’

‘In patches,’ said Patricia’s voice.

‘Perhaps so. Certainly he’s vague about his writing; it’s important to get that. It’s important

to get this whole attitude to his writing. You'll have gathered that it's a slightly uncomfortable attitude. He isn't ashamed of the Spider; indeed, he's really uncommonly proud of him. Have a good look at daddy, his taste and his tempo, and you'll see that the thing is an odd and unique achievement.'

'You will also wonder', said the voice, 'where the Spider comes from.'

'From hiding-places ten years deep,' murmured Holme. His mind seemed to be running on the English poets.

'But the point', Belinda went on, 'is how he writes. The stuff is wholly divorced from the waking world, and while he's at it I doubt if he can be called awake himself. But when he revises he's quite awake; that's where the critical control comes in. And in that lies the basis of these operations by the unknown. Daddy read his fair copies and was surprised by an unexpected turn here and there; a forgotten turn, he would have thought it. It was only gradually that he got a sense of – of something happening. For a time he kept mum. It was because he kept mum, I think, that the thing took – well, a somewhat oblique turn in his mind. Because of that and – somehow – Herbert Chown. And now Chown's here again. If Timmy can bring a rank nuisance to Rust he will.'

Timmy giggled nervously. Winter, who felt the unwitting shaft, stepped back abruptly into the half-darkness and tripped over an unseen obstacle. He grabbed and found himself clutching a pair of unnaturally long human legs which were sprawled outwards from a settee. There was a moment of confusion and somebody snapped on lights.

'Why,' cried Belinda in evident relief, 'it's only Rupert!'

'Nothing but that,' agreed a dry voice. 'Please carry on.'

'Or rather,' said the lanky man called Rupert, 'don't carry on but listen to me. Long experience of this household tells me that you have been talking about it and about, and probably without all the facts. Incidentally there is a new fact. While you have been talking something has happened.'

'If you mean', said Timmy, 'another exhibition on the clarinet--'

'I don't.'

Holme climbed off the table, Timmy thrust his cue in the rack. Winter looked curiously at this latest of the Eliots to appear. A man of about Mr Eliot's age, Rupert contrived to look considerably older. His unusual height and reach, which an erect carriage would have established as a presence, had gone to seed in something between a lounge and a shamble; belying his air of brisk competence in the present was an eye which seemed to hold too much commerce with the past – not the impersonal and liberating past of the scholar, nor the scientist's sobering past in geological time, but that little past of the man, thronged with deprivation and missed chances, which devours that which feeds upon it. The gentleman who ironically agreed that he was nothing but Rupert was – it came to Winter with unacademic penetration – of the species of professional failures; once upon a time his sort had been kept safely in Canada on two pounds a week.

'The truth is', said Rupert Eliot with veiled contempt, 'that you are all specimens of the literary mind. You can't get through with a thing without stepping back to meditate upon your interesting selves. Whereas I have always been a man of action and can be trusted to stick to the point. But first, and since this gathering appears to be so distinctly in the family's confidence, a moment had better be given to introductions.'

'Gerald Winter,' said Belinda; 'our cousin Rupert Eliot.'

The man of action among the Eliots gave a cold bow – a bow so dramatically cold, Winter thought, as to show the true Eliot flair once more; the sort of bow one might picture Mr Dombey offering to a particularly uncongenial intruder upon the sanctity of the home. 'Timmy', this frigid person said, '– a word of advice. It is far from discreet to discuss this delicate matter in a darkened billiard-room into which anyone might creep and eavesdrop at will.'

This was too much for Winter. 'After all, Mr Eliot–'

'As a matter of fact,' said Timmy dreamily, 'Rupert's a baronet. Head of the family. Honoured name.' Timmy seemed to have plunged himself in abstraction and gloom.

'After all, Sir Rupert, you are the only person who did – er – drop in, so there's no harm done.'

'And now', said Rupert, ignoring this, 'the particular papers with which this impertinent joker has meddled–'

Belinda exclaimed impatiently. 'But what has happened?'

'I understand that you want our friend Mr Winter to be seized of the facts. These papers are the manuscript – or typescript, if there be such a word – of a novel called *Murder at Midnight*. You will not need to be told that its principal personage is the Spider. Incidentally, I may say that I regard the Spider, and not myself, as the head of our house.'

There was a pained silence.

'At least our fortunes are founded upon him. But to go forward. In this novel it appears that the Spider is cast in a blameless and indeed laudable role – that of a private detective of ample means, beautiful manners, and outstanding intelligence.' Rupert paused on this; he had all the family sense of words and it somewhat spoilt his pose as the practical man. 'This, of course, is at it has been for some time. Only the Spider has that most unfortunate thing' – Rupert squared himself a little on his settee – 'a past. And in these manipulations of the manuscript he is regressing on it. You have heard of the joke played on the Birdwire woman – as vulgar and stupid a joke as a man could imagine. She was burgled and so forth by a Spider who had retreated on his old, bad self. In this tampering with the manuscript – though it must be admitted as an altogether subtler affair – something of a similar sort, I understand, occurred. The general effect was of backsliding. The creature developed, one might put it, a suspicious moral wriggle. It almost appeared, when one read closely, that in the final pages he might turn out to have been the villain of the piece.'

'Like the chief constables', interrupted Holme, 'who turn out to have been the murderers all the

time.'

'No doubt; I have little time to study that sort of thing.'

Timmy was softly whistling a melancholy stave; Belinda was drawing on the floor with a piece of billiard chalk. Winter, thoughtfully studying Sir Rupert across the billiard-table, asked a question. 'Why that past tense? Have the manuscripts--?'

'They have. When my cousin became convinced that something untoward had occurred he tore them up. A great pity; they might have yielded something. Richard is sensitive and unpractical – damned unpractical. We have to be practical and ask practical questions. And one of them I don't doubt you have on the tip of your tongue. Did anyone see these adulterated typescripts except my cousin? And the answer is: yes, his secretary.' Again Rupert paused. Timmy, at a corner of the table, was fidgeting with a pocket; Belinda was sitting quite still. 'Only, of course, the secretary is dead.'

Yet again Rupert paused – perhaps for effect, perhaps because the door had opened to admit a servant. Belinda got up. 'Tea,' she said briefly. 'I'd better help push it round. And send you some here.' She went quickly out.

'Dead,' repeated Rupert; 'suddenly and violently dead.' He chuckled. 'There you go' – Winter had certainly given a decided start – 'the literary mind once more. In a business like this you must have a relevant corpse. But this corpse is strictly irrelevant. The fellow just happened to get in an airliner which collided with another plane. The whole incident has been vetted and guaranteed above board – by about four

thousand feet.' Rupert chuckled again, this time in tribute to his own wit – a trick that made him momentarily a horrid caricature of Timmy. 'It just so happens that the secretary is out of it. You ask, therefore, if there is other independent testimony.'

'I certainly don't conceive it my business' – Winter spoke with asperity – 'to ask anything of the sort.'

'But you want to know. And there is. There is the evidence of my cousin Archie Eliot.'

'I see. You mean that Mr Eliot showed the papers to this Mr Archie Eliot?'

'As a matter of fact,' interposed Timmy, 'cousin Archie is a knight. Donkey's years ago he built a bridge – he's an engineer – and was knighted. The bridge fell down shortly afterwards. Cousin Archie lives with us too.' He relapsed into significant silence.

'Mr Eliot showed Sir – ah – Archibald Eliot the papers?'

'I think it more likely', said Rupert easily, 'that Archie had a look at them on the quiet.' He glanced towards the door. 'Belinda – reliable girl – has been as good as her promise about the tea.'

The tea-service was authentic Queen Anne; the tea had journeyed from China owning no more commerce with the sea than is enforced by the English Channel. Winter, who had a foreboding that the leisurely declivities of the Eliot affair were presently going to carry him beyond his depth, found these evidences of judicious living grateful. 'A true caravan' – he spoke with something of the connoisseur's air of Dr

Bussenschutt – ‘is becoming rarer and rarer.’ He poured himself out another cup. ‘How comforting that Belinda is, as you say, reliable.’

Rupert snorted – an authentic snort that shook a little shower of crumbs from his Edwardian moustache. ‘Within limits,’ he said; ‘strictly within limits. The truth is’ – he gestured at Timmy – ‘they are a dreamy lot; talented in their way – but dreamy and no nous. Now I daresay you’re a man like myself’ – Rupert appeared to have forgotten that Winter was an intruder to be treated with cold reserve – ‘who has knocked about the world and knows what’s what. I daresay you know that a damned impertinent joke isn’t an act of God but simply a damned impertinent joke. And that you have to get the joker and smash him. Action’ – Rupert took another piece of buttered toast and edged a cushion comfortably beneath his head – ‘action before debate is my principle and I may tell you it has brought me through a lot. Have you seen the bull out there on the terrace? If I had my way I’d show this awful bohemian mob the door in double quick time. Do you know that there are twelve male guests in this house at present and that nine of them’ – he looked thoughtfully at Winter – ‘or perhaps it *may* be eight, are absolute bounders? I mean to say that a man of the world would ask at once, What do you expect? And now’ – Rupert stirred reluctantly – ‘I suppose we had better be having a look at that red paint.’

Winter jumped. ‘That *what?*’

‘Red paint. I told you something had happened. The clarinet was no doubt by way of announcing it. Red paint is a material of which our joker is particularly fond.’ Rupert disposed his straggling limbs for motion. ‘Umbrellas,’ he said; ‘we want

umbrellas. And some cursed fool has hitched mine to grandfather Richard's bull.'

They left the billiard-room: Timmy with his hands buried expressively in the pockets of old flannel trousers, Rupert with a great appearance of decisive action, Holme with the dubiety of one who is uncertain if he still belongs to the party, and Winter conjuring up imaginary uses of red paint. In the hall a group of people – rather wet, rather scandalized, rather amused – were chattering before a big log fire. Off an outer lobby, and through a glass door, was a small room which served to house a telephone; Winter glanced in as he passed and saw Patricia Appleby and Belinda sitting on a table with the instrument between them. There was food for thought, it occurred to him, in their expressions. Belinda was looking puzzled, annoyed but far from alarmed; Patricia, neither annoyed nor puzzled, displayed something as much like alarm as was possible to a person with her particular sort of chin. Both had their eyes on the telephone and their position suggested that they were waiting to get through a trunk call.

At the front door there was quite a collection of umbrellas, mostly wet; there was even a servant handing them out – rather as if they were programmes to some obscure entertainment going forward in the dusk. André had just come in and was drying his beard with a large silk handkerchief. He was chattering excitedly to the air – unaware, it was to be guessed, that some companion of a moment before had given him the slip.

They went out. The terrace, here sweeping away from them in a semi-circle before the centre of the house, was already a dubious

territory fading into indeterminate space, its balustrade and a broken line of trees beyond mingled in a blottesque composition which would presently give way to the single darkness of a clouded night. The air was at once chilly and weighted with illusive scent; the smell – hovering between suggestions of freshness and decay – of mere damp winter earth. Rain pattered softly on flagstones, gurgled as if in panicky hurry down invisible pipes, somewhere dripped heavily from a choked gutter. Involuntarily they stopped – perhaps because they were looking out on what was alien and void, perhaps simply because it was cold and uncomfortably wet – their umbrellas bobbing and gesturing incongruously beneath the shadowy outlines of a classical portico. Then they ran down steps and across the terrace.

At the farthest sweep they came on the vague bulk of a car, its bonnet pointing towards the house. 'Archie,' Rupert called out, 'show a light!'

There was an answering call, and a dazzling beam shot out from the side of the car; they moved beyond it, and could distinguish an arm protruding from a window and manipulating a spotlight. They turned round. Rust loomed above them – without welcome, without menace, a large neutral blotch upon the late evening. The spotlight ran across the terrace, zig-zagged up the portico so that the shadows of the pillars circled like the spokes of a crazy machine, caught for a moment a row of Ionic capitals, jumped to the pediment and gleamed momentarily from the single cyclops eye of a round window in the centre. Then it sank to the architrave and paused, focused. Various according to their natures the little group of people standing by the car exclaimed. For boldly across the architrave,

where a classic age had been wont to cut words of civic piety and devotion to the gods, was splashed an inscription in red paint. It simply read:

THIS IS FOLLY HALL

For the second time that day Winter felt a trickle of rain water down his neck. 'Not good', he said. 'Distinctly inferior to the effort *du côté de chez Birdwire*. Again rude, but this time not funny.' Silence answered him, He looked again at the grotesquely floodlit inscription. 'Yes,' he said soberly; 'odd – distinctly odd.'

From within the large pale-cream car a voice – presumably the voice of that Sir Archibald Eliot whose bridge had fallen down – spoke with stolid politeness. 'Rupert, Timmy – had you not better bring your friends into the car? It must be rather wet.'

They climbed in behind. The air was warm and dry. Archie could be distinguished as a globular little man of middle age, puffing quietly at a pipe and gazing at the untoward appearance before him as one gazes at the less exciting parts of a football match. It was a moment before Winter realized that he was not alone. Beside him on the front seat, and contemplating the same spectacle with the plainest bewilderment and dread, was the still and deflated figure of the owner of Rust Hall.

Somewhere between Rust and London there must be an electrical disturbance. The voice was coming indistinctly through.

'Yes,' said the voice – a pleasant if ordinary voice, perhaps with a shade more of instinctive reasonableness than would be welcome to everybody – 'yes, I know I've promised to come down. But I was thinking of Sunday morning; there's a good deal of work here. What exactly are the symptoms, nurse?' The voice's sense of humour verged on the conscientious.

'I am at the bedside', continued the voice, 'of a repentant and parturient burglar, waiting the delivery of King's Evidence. And I'm asking what are the symptoms at your end. I'm asking – never mind. What's it all about?' The voice was silent. It interrupted only once. 'Don't *please John me*,' it said; 'keep to the facts.'

'Midnight?' said the voice. 'I see what you mean. But do you realize I'm at least a hundred miles away? And do you think I can take a police car on holiday just for the asking? You do? When do they dine – eight? I've an hour's work here, but I'll make it. I said I'll make it. Break my neck? – it's possible but improbable. Never blow hot and cold. Goodbye. And meantime don't meddle.' Somewhere in New Scotland Yard a telephone receiver was replaced with a decisive click.

Patricia swung her legs off the table. 'My brother will be here for dinner,' she said.

Belinda glanced through the glass door at a passing bevy of her father's guests. 'What's he like?' she asked.

'Distinctly superior. His clothes are made to measure and the soles of his shoes are not noticeably thicker than your brother's.'

Belinda wrinkled her nose a shade nearer her bumpy forehead. 'I mean physique.'

'Five eleven and a half; fair hair and grey eyes; muscular and well nourished—'

'Oh, lord! Did he say anything?'

'Not to meddle and never to blow hot and cold. He's an elder brother.'

'Patricia, I suppose we've done the right thing? What with Timmy bringing down first Chown and then Hugo what's-his-name and that don—'

'John will clear the thing up.' Patricia spoke with confidence but without cheerfulness. She had an objective mind. In working through medieval manuscripts one can be tolerably sure that getting at the truth is desirable. But in the sphere of human relationships circumstances are conceivable in which a mystery had better rest a mystery still. John would disagree. But John had the professional angle. In fact John was not necessarily to be kotowed to. Patricia glanced at her watch. 'We have just under three hours', she said, 'for that spot of meddling. Come along.'

Belinda slid from the telephone table. 'Very well. What do you want to do?'

'We'll go after that red paint. How applied and whence transported. Will anybody be having a go

at that?’

‘Of course not. We’d just sit and stare and then in about a week Rupert would vindicate his active character by saying at breakfast, “Better send a fellow up one day to clear away that damned impertinent mess.”’

‘Then we have a clear run. It looked to me as if, short of scaffolding, it must have been done from above – someone leaning over from the pediment rather hideously. I wonder if that gives us a line?’

‘It gives us all the Eliots for a start. We’ve climbed since climbing began. Even Archie has made climbing history; somewhere there’s an Eliot Traverse named after him. But I suppose the need of a climber’s head would rule out some people: Mrs Moule, for instance. Anyway, we can go up and have a look. I’ll get Timmy.’ Belinda had the ability to think of two things at once.

‘Don’t. If you do he’ll collect that Toplady, and the thing will turn into a sort of official commission of enquiry. Come on.’

They slipped across the hall, through a baize door and up a back staircase on which they were secure from wandering members of the house-party. On the second floor Belinda made a sortie and returned with an electric torch; armed with this they addressed themselves to a narrower staircase. ‘We can begin looking for paint here,’ said Belinda. ‘The main staircase goes right to the top, but I suppose this is the likelier route for an unauthorized decorator. And up on this floor there’s only one room that would be any use; the one with the round window in the middle of the pediment – he must have gone out through that. It used to be the stronghold of our

superannuated housekeeper. But it will be empty now – unless they've put in a latecomer since I finished the arrangements. While we're there we can get it ready for brother John.' They climbed slowly, searching for evidences of red paint with a degree of thoroughness which brother John might, or might not, have passed. This process they repeated, with equal unsuccessful, through half the length of a long low corridor. Belinda stopped before a closed door, opened it, felt among a group of switches, and turned on a shaded light at the farther end of the room. 'Here we are,' she said, 'and there's the window.'

They ran across the room and drew back curtains. At close quarters the cyclops eye was, as might have been expected, sizable and in its centre was contrived an ordinary sash window, now open at the top. Belinda pushed it up from the bottom and they peered out. 'Archie's grandstand has gone,' she said; 'nothing stirring except Chaos and Old Night.' She flashed the torch downwards. About three feet below the window ran a tolerably broad stone shelf – the base of the shallow triangle which framed the pediment. 'Inches over two feet,' she said. 'No difficulty there. Only petticoats are perhaps a little otiose.' In a couple of seconds she had slipped off her dress.

Patricia, hitherto the leader, hesitated for a fraction of a second. She was unromantic and knew the tricks of her own nerves. 'Are we going through?' she asked. 'I don't know that we'll collect much.'

'I'm going through and you're going to hold the torch.'

Alas, thought Patricia, that she had never done more than stump up Helvellyn! To Belinda

exploiting expensive pastimes in Switzerland there was only one reply. Patricia, who a few minutes before had been cautioning an elder brother against breaking his neck in a fast car, wriggled from her frock and kicked off her shoes. 'You can go first', she said, ' – if you step on it.'

Belinda stepped on it, with brisk professional caution. 'All right.' Her voice floated in from the near darkness. 'Hand out the torch.'

Patricia handed the torch – and climbed. She was on the ledge, her face flecked by rain and her body instinctively braced against a wind which wasn't blowing. She wondered if her head were going to swim; it swam gently as she wondered. Better look, she thought – and looked outwards and downwards. Night had been an illusion of the electric light within the room. It was still early evening – early evening of a dead winter day: prematurely dark grey fading to darkness, rain turning again to mist drifting, heeling, lifting and falling into darkness. Climbers do not love such conditions; and Patricia, no climber, did not love them. Her head swam once more and she clutched without hope that there was anything to clutch. She found that she was still by the window, one arm securely crooked round a window-frame which would most certainly be in excellent repair. Forward from this position she found it beyond her will to move. Honest, agonized, and furious, she said quietly to the dusk, 'I can't move. Damn, damn, *damn*.'

'Good enough. Stay where you are. I tell you this sort of thing is entirely a trick – a matter of habituation.' Even when engaged on a juvenile and dangerous prank Belinda was inclined to use rather learned words. And Patricia stayed where she was, relieving her humiliation by most

unjustly cursing the whole race of rock-scrambling Eliots as damned, damned, damned Barbary apes, and swearing to be even with them.

'I'm kneeling and you're standing', came Belinda's voice from close by, 'just above the funny-business. It's a bit puzzling. This cornice is as I thought: a shade over two feet broad. And if you think of the mouldings you'll realize that where it meets the wall it must be a good fourteen inches down. And if the architrave is flush with this pediment wall they are also two feet *in*. Probably the pediment wall comes in a bit, but even so it must have been a frightfully difficult job. And the joker wouldn't want to spend too long on it: even on this wet afternoon somebody might potter out on the terrace and take a look up. I suppose with practice beforehand and a long-handled brush - ' She paused. 'I'm going to get my head over and look. Easy enough if I didn't have to poke the torch over too.' There was a long-drawn silence. Patricia was glad of that robustly obscene vocabulary to which co-education affords the key; she spoke the words to herself softly, over and over again. 'Well I'm dashed.' Belinda was standing up beside her, her own arm safely crooked round the other window-frame. 'The moving finger writes and having writ smartly expunges itself.'

Patricia's mouth was dry but she contrived to say, 'Expunges itself?' in something like tones of reasoned interrogation.

'I managed to get a dekko at it.' Belinda ballasted her slightly hypertrophied vocabulary with appropriate slang. 'And it's running quietly away in the rain. Water-paint, I suppose. No good

brother John bringing down the handwriting experts.' She laughed – for the first time rather shakily. 'Let's get in. I'm scared.'

They climbed back and began, wet and slightly shivering, to scramble into their frocks. 'Dear me,' said Patricia – who in point of calm had considerable leeway to make up – 'do look.' In a far corner of the room something was stirring on the bed; it heaved up in the inadequate light like a little wintry wave. There was the click of a switch. They were contemplating Hugo Toplady, sitting up in sea-green pyjamas and plainly casting about in his mind for appropriate speech.

With a terrific effort of compression Toplady said, 'Hullo.'

In the circumstances it was perhaps the best thing to say, and deserved better treatment than it received. Patricia dropped on her hands and knees and crawled slowly across the floor; Belinda, once more led, did the same. Searching the carpet inch by inch, they moved steadily from the window towards the bed, leaving a little trail of wet knees and toes behind them. 'I suppose,' said Toplady, 'that this is a "rag"?' There was more nervousness than censure in the inverted commas with which he contrived to surround the last word. He glanced about him rather as if he expected the joke to include an impending jug of cold water or fireworks under the bed.

Belinda jumped up, feeling that strict moderation was necessary when teasing a guest. 'I'm sorry,' she said; 'as a matter of fact we're searching for something.' She pushed back wet hair and looked as engaging as she could. But evidently the man was offended. 'I hope,' she added, 'you won't tell Timmy; he would be frightfully annoyed.'

Toplady thawed at once. To stand between a freakish young woman and the just censure of a male relative was quite in his picture. Patricia, not to spoil the effect by giggling – a universal instinct which the dictionary most unjustly confines to affected or ill-bred girls – buried her nose in the carpet. 'And we didn't know', Belinda went on, 'that you had this room, or that you went to bed so early.'

With unexpected dash Toplady climbed out of bed. 'It came to me', he said cautiously, 'that a quiet afternoon might ward off an impending chill caught on the way down.' He looked at Belinda with genuine anxiety. 'I think you will know that I don't mean that it was in any degree an uncomfortable journey; it was perfectly comfortable and there was a great deal – really a *great* deal – of interesting conversation. But the junction–' Judging it injudicious to be specific about the junction he broke off to wrap himself decorously in a dressing-gown. Patricia was still crawling about the floor, now quite seriously; he looked at her for a moment as if she were a sort of examination paper in etiquette and then got down on his own hands and knees. 'I wonder', he asked, 'if I can help?'

'As a matter of fact, we're looking for traces of red paint. You see, the joker has been out again.'

'Oh, dear! I do hope it's not – not another offensive cartoon?' Toplady peered about the carpet, seemingly expecting to discover horrid libels sketched on its four corners. 'It had occurred to one to speculate whether the joker mightn't think to find a not unfavourable moment–' He broke off. 'I'm sure I didn't leave the window as wide open as that.'

Belinda explained. 'We've just been outside. So has the joker with his paint – apparently while you were asleep.'

'He might', interjected Patricia, 'have painted *you*. Red all over, like the reddleman in Thomas Hardy.'

Toplady gave his mind for a moment to Thomas Hardy, marked his utter irrelevance, and returned to the perplexing matter in hand. 'This deplorable person has been out there?'

'Yes. But not painting pictures; just recording the fact that this is Folly Hall.'

'While I was sleeping here he climbed out and painted that – out there on the pediment?'

'Lower down, as it happens. On the architrave.'

Toplady offered cigarettes. In his hands the process took on the character of a minor diplomatic occasion; perhaps he was admitting that there had been adequate cause for the invasion of his territory. 'How very strange,' he said. 'The joker becomes more interesting – and one hesitates as to whether one should not add a shade less absolutely unattractive – than before.' He walked the length of the room with an extinguished match, returned, stared thoughtfully into the match-box. 'First with Mrs Birdwire he is crude, boisterous, and – in the opinion of one or two people at least to whose taste we must a little defer – not without an authentic coarse humour. Then' – Toplady shut the match-box – 'he turns subtle. And now' – he opened it again – 'he returns to the crude and boisterous. But in doing so he adds a new element: one of marked intrepidity.'

'It's a matter', said Patricia darkly, 'of habituation.'

'To begin with,' continued Toplady, ignoring this enigma, 'he deserts the complete safety of ground-level for the sake of a slightly enhanced effect up here. Then he deserts the comparative safety of painting on the pediment for the sake of a very slightly enhanced effect indeed. In fact' – he paused in search of accurate expression – 'by insisting on achieving his scrawl – as I suppose it is – on the architrave he was accepting a maximum of additional danger for a minimum of additional style. "Style" I think is the only adequate word. He wanted his inscription to go just where in such a building inscriptions should go. This is very interesting indeed. One begins – tentatively of course – to build up some picture of the man.'

They looked at him with respect, momentarily acknowledging the masculine intellect – an abstraction that blows where it will and speaks through strange voices. Patricia contrived to retaliate on the voice – 'As you say,' she said, 'it adds something new' – but she was aware that Toplady with his conscientious march had arrived at the point before she had: the point that the joker had established himself as a personality – and an odd one. In the face of this reasonable young man she was reminded too that half an hour ago she had telephoned to her more than equally reasonable brother on the strength of a sheer if ingenious intuition. 'Mr Toplady,' she said, "'This is Folly Hall" – what are we to make of that?'

'To make of it?' He glanced at Belinda rather uncomfortably, as if his more instinctive self was prompted to reply that what they might make of

it was a shrewd thrust. 'We must just take it as a piece of silly rudeness.' He seemed to feel that amplification was required. 'Based on the fact that at Rust' – he plunged heroically at the pronoun – 'we are rather an unconventional party.'

Belinda took this as containing a hint as well as a tactful understatement and made a movement of retreat. 'We dine at eight, Mr Toplady: I hope–'

Toplady hastened to offer polite reassurances. 'Of course I shall be down. I do assure you I am perfectly right again. I believe I find a little mystery' – he looked surprised at the simplicity of his statement – 'stimulating.' He turned to his dressing-table and made a brisk grab at a safety-razor and a sponge.

The two girls, conscious of a decidedly ungroomed appearance in themselves, withdrew. 'If we meddle again', said Belinda when they were halfway down the corridor, 'it will be discreetly in the wake of your brother. And what I chiefly see between now and dinner-time is a hot bath. The whole thing is simply stupid and annoying and nothing more. Or would be nothing more if I were certain that my father took it that way too. Patricia, why are *you* rattled?'

Patricia, still conscious of failure as a steeplejack, denied that she was rattled at all, and on this piece of disingenuousness they quarrelled – pausing at the top of the staircase to do so. 'You are all *most* annoying,' declared Belinda sweepingly, and with a crossness which might have suggested that she was obscurely rattled herself. 'You are all conspiring against the peace of this house. To begin with there's Timmy, mystery-mongering round and bringing down first that awful Chown, who makes a living out of

believing that everybody's cracked, and then this wretched tutor of his—'

'That wretched tutor seems quite a sensible person to me.'

'You seem quite a sensible person yourself. But you have just the same air as he has – an appearance of knowing that the thing involves lord knows what. And then there's the Moule with her higher spookery and her eternal anxious listening for the joker's sound-effects. There's André proposing—' She stopped. Behind them had arisen a disturbance compounded of hurrying feet and inarticulate cries. They turned round. It was Toplady once more, bearing down on them with his dressing-gown in a disarray rather suggestive of a modern-dress *Hamlet*. He paused before them and his emotion revealed itself as one of abounding manly rage – rage which bereft him for a moment of all power of coherent speech.

'The bloody fool!' shouted Toplady magnificently and surprisingly: 'Oh, the bloody fool!' He was brandishing some problematical object before him; presently he controlled himself sufficiently to thrust it beneath their noses. It was a shaving-brush and it had been used in the liberal application of red paint.

Driving in the early dusk down Mrs Birdwire's avenue – scene of so many affecting reconciliations with the animals whose clamour was fading in the middle distance – Dr Bussenschutt turned in his seat and took a final glance at the sprawl of white which represented the citadel he had so successfully stormed. Then he peered at his watch. He had disappointed Mr

Shoon at luncheon and was anxious to be in excellent time for dinner. 'My good fellow,' he said to his driver, 'can you make the Abbey within the hour?'

'I reckon so, sir. Beyond Little Limber we can strike the by-pass and give a miss to the bad road through Low Swaffham.'

The ancient person in the smock had been warmed by Mrs Birdwire's tea, and this was a longer speech than he had hitherto made. Bussenschutt sat forward in sudden interest. 'What,' he asked, 'is your name?'

'George Cowthick, sir.'

'Good Master Cowthick, I would have you talk.'

'Beg your pardon, sir?'

'Converse.' Bussenschutt observed the ancient person to be at a loss. 'Converse', he amplified helpfully, 'on the state of the crops.' Mr Cowthick was still silent. 'Oats!' said Bussenschutt, at once encouragingly and commandingly. 'Maize! Beans! Hops!' He was but imperfectly acquainted with the subject of rural economy. '*Turnips*,' said Bussenschutt as a last resort.

'*Ah-rr*. It be great turnip country round Pigg.' A chord had been struck; Mr Cowthick abundantly conversed.

Bussenschutt sat back and listened, an expression of intellectual conviction forming itself on his face. 'Stay!' he called. 'I cannot be mistaken. But there is a further test. Master Cowthick, I desire you to repeat certain words after me. *I do wish we might have the '96*.'

Mr Cowthick, who was past wonder, was eventually prevailed upon to repeat this mysterious phrase. '*Eureka*!' cried Bussenschutt,

tumbling headlong into the only adequately expressive languages. '*Dies faustus!*'

'Beg pardon, sir?'

'I'll call it', Bussenschutt translated, 'a day.'

In the library at Rust Dr Chown was meditating a matter of professional ethics. His position was delicate. He had been brought down by an interested relative in the person of the patient's son, and this was regular enough. But he was not clear that the patient's son was of legal age, and he had a feeling that the patient's daughter, who was somewhat older, disapproved of his presence. It would be better, therefore, that there should be no bill: by this means his position would immediately cease to be delicate. Psychiatrists have the misfortune to work with a sort of invisible slot-machine at their side, and patients are not always able to conceal their awareness that into this they must drop an equally invisible shilling or so a minute; they sometimes even bring dreams in which the matter has been wrapped in an elaborate symbolism. Every professional worker has this slot-machine, but the conditions of the psychiatrist's labours make his peculiarly noticeable; it is as if the patient had taken a taxi-cab to explore a maze and had his eye now on the meter and now on the constant retreats down blind alleys. To refrain, therefore, from pulling down the flag when chartered is an authentic if expensive pleasure; it converts dignified professional labour into a yet more dignified pursuit of pure science... Pleasingly conscious of the correctness of his own position and the eventual beneficence of his possibly painful ministrations, Dr Chown sat in the library and

subjected Mr Eliot opposite to an absorbed scientific scrutiny.

'It is odd,' said Dr Chown; 'odd and disconcerting. But we shall get to the bottom of it without a doubt. We have only' – he glanced encouragingly across at Mr Eliot – 'to look about us for the right man.'

'My dear Chown, it is most kind of you to concern yourself with this unfortunate business.' Mr Eliot was huddled in a deep leather chair and in the vanishing light would have been almost invisible had not Chown thoughtfully arranged a reading lamp to fall on his face. 'You think it can be got to the bottom of?'

'I think', said Chown, amending cautiously, 'that we can control it. My experience has been that when such things occur' – he spoke as if his case-books teemed with ill-conducted Spiders – 'they can be controlled. A little study, a little analysis, quiet and judicious measures firmly taken: these will resolve the mystery satisfactorily.'

Mr Eliot nodded. His eyes, it seemed to Chown, were straying nervously amid the shadows. 'As I grow older, Chown, I am confirmed in the commonplace that the consequences of our actions are incalculable. Our deeds and even our unspoken thoughts generate forces which knock at a thousand unknown doors. Our fantasies go out and mould other people's actuality. So why should they not return upon us again?'

Chown assumed an expression of sympathetic understanding – a branch of theatrical art in which he could have given points to Peter Holme. 'Very true, Eliot; very true indeed and most lucidly expressed. Nevertheless you and I must

take an objective view. We must step right out of this household, get away from the whole familial constellation, and approach the matter as strangers from the outside. Let us put ourselves in the frame of mind of one of your guests – a disinterested guest – who steps on to your terrace and views this display of red paint. I am struck by the dangerousness of the proceeding. The man who applied that paint was surely risking his neck. But I am an amateur on heights and perhaps mistaken. 'Dr Chown looked sharply at Mr Eliot. 'You, I believe, have climbing experience?'

'Yes, I have. We are all fond of it.'

'What a pity that we could not have held a muster of the household immediately after the event.'

'A muster? Dear me!' Mr Eliot looked bewildered.

'I should expect' – Chown gave the reading lamp a deft push, so that it picked out Mr Eliot's features a little more clearly – 'a very perceptible degree of shock. Short of a professional window-cleaner or steeplejack, the adventure would be unfamiliar – it would be that even to an experienced climber. And novel danger always leaves its mark. The person would be nervous and distraught; there would be a detectable trauma.'

'Ah, yes.' Mr Eliot – perhaps the Mr Eliot who liked a little learned talk – brightened slightly. 'Trauma – yes, I follow you.' He started as a coal fell in the grate.

'As it is' – Chown was soothing – 'we are of course entirely without evidence of that sort. But, even so, we shall, I am confident – ah – get

things straight.' He leant forward and poked Mr Eliot's fire in a friendly way. 'I think you said it all began with a telephone call?' He was aware that on how it all began his host had said nothing at all. But Mr Eliot's mind was confused and he might safely take a few short cuts. 'And I think you were called to the instrument by your son, who had answered the call?'

'Yes, that is so.' Mr Eliot's reply was again absent. He had lifted his head, listening. A chatter of excited voices was drifting past the room. Chown was meditating how best to proceed in face of this highly suggestible state when Mr Eliot corrected himself. 'No; that is wrong. I am afraid my attention wandered. I recollect clearly that when the bell rang I picked up the receiver myself. Timmy had no hand in it. He was unaware of what had happened until I told him later in the evening.'

Chown nodded into the fire with a great appearance of thoughtfulness. 'And now', he said, 'let us consider suspects.'

'Suspects?' Mr Eliot shifted uncomfortably in his enveloping chair and his tone was defensive. 'I have considered', he added apologetically, 'so many in my time.' For a second he lit up into gaiety, glowing like some submarine creature that carries its own electric lighting about the ocean bed. 'I suspect the whole suspect-business.'

Dr Chown looked serious at once. He had found that nothing so disturbs the course of an analysis as an access of *euphoria* in the patient and he was always on his guard, therefore, against cheerfulness breaking in. 'I only wish', he said, 'that we could take a light-hearted view. But in saying that the matter can be controlled I would not wish to mislead you. It may be graver than

we think.' Mr Eliot looked appropriately dashed. 'And now let us come to a review of the members of your house-party.'

Mr Eliot, thus called upon to review the retinue of the Spider, sighed gently. 'And wonder', he murmured, 'how the devil they got there.' The quotation encouraged him to add, 'I think I heard the dressing bell?'

'And now,' said Chown remorselessly some fifteen minutes later, 'take the members of your own household. To begin with there are your cousins: do you trust them?'

'Trust Rupert and Archie?' Mr Eliot could be felt as groping after the conventional answer to this question. He groped in vain; with atmosphere of the confessional. 'I can't say that I do. Not all round, that is to say. Of course they are both good fellows, very good fellows indeed, and I was exceedingly glad when they came to live with us. Rupert and I were brought up as boys together – quite *arcades ambo* indeed. And of recent years Archie has been most congenial. He has literary tastes. I fear his tastes were a little too literary for his profession; he was highly successful for a time and many of his structures were referred to as poems in steel. Unfortunately there was often some slip or hitch on the material side – which is of course important in engineering.'

'Sir Archibald, then, despite admirable qualities, is not entirely trustworthy?'

'Well, not perhaps entirely so. There was an embarrassing incident some years ago when Archie was found to have gained access to the wine-cellar by means of a skeleton key. As a matter of fact, I had got up the process of

manufacture of such things myself; my writing, you know, takes me into odd corners of knowledge. Archie simply lifted the idea from my book. And that added, somehow, to the uncomfortableness of the thing.'

Chown nodded. Mr Eliot, it seemed, had already had some experience of what he called one's fantasies returning upon one again. 'And Sir Rupert?' he prompted.

'Rupert?' Mr Eliot was uncomfortable but helpless. 'Rupert is a capital fellow, with a great deal of knowledge of the world. He has knocked about quite surprisingly; a man of action, as he sometimes says himself.'

'He had been active recently?'

At this penetrating question Mr Eliot looked quite surprised. 'When I come to think of it, no. He seems to have grown very fond of Rust.' He wriggled in his chair – rather as if he were edging round to the bright side of something. 'Of course he is safer here. As I say, he is not wholly reliable.'

'Ah.'

Mr Eliot's helplessness grew. 'About money, chiefly. He never seems quite to have understood it. I remember as a boy a wholly deplorable incident over the poor-box in our parish church. The rector took a particularly dark view; I suppose he was bound to consider sacrilege as more serious than common theft. Nowadays it is chiefly cheques. They offer more scope.'

Having got thus pleasingly far Dr Chown eased off. He spoke of the folly of regarding the robbing of a poor-box in a criminal rather than a strictly scientific light; he spoke of the evil of priests and

priestcraft in general. Mr Eliot threw a log on the fire and Chown gave it another friendly stir with the poker. And then the armistice was over. 'There remain', said Chown, 'your own children. This is always a delicate subject, but it has to be faced. The attitude of your children is highly ambivalent, very highly ambivalent indeed.'

Mr Eliot stared thoughtfully into the fire; he seemed reluctant to be drawn even by a learned word this time.

'They like you', continued Chown soothingly; 'they really like you very much indeed. At the same time they hate you. And this is particularly so of your son.'

'Really,' protested Mr Eliot, roused at length, 'I hardly think you know enough of Timmy - '

Chown raised an authoritative hand. 'I am speaking', he said, 'of something arrived at inductively from the study of thousands of parents and children. We may protest. But the thing is a scientific fact. We may cling to the illusion. But this is the reality.' Chown was prone to this antithetical sort of utterance when confronted by people whose minds were obstinately set against the light; he wrought it now to a positively Lucretian elevation. 'You may rebel against the law. But it is wiser to draw strength from it. We are wounded. But we know that the wound is in the nature of things.'

Mr Eliot winced – perhaps at the memory of the sort of wounds to which Chown referred, perhaps because he disliked too many sentences beginning with prepositions. 'Is the gist of this', he asked, 'that Timmy and Belinda may be playing an ungenerous joke on me?'

A momentary frown disturbed the studied serenity with which Chown was accustomed to conduct his operations. He disapproved of patients asking questions; he disliked swift transitions from abstraction to the concrete. 'Certainly not,' he said. 'I am far from thinking that we are in a position to make suggestions... Would you say that your children are freakish?'

'Yes. They are at a freakish age. Though for that matter I am freakish myself.'

'Ah!' said Chown. He made a full pause. 'As you say, the dressing bell has gone. No doubt we must break off.'

'Break off?' repeated Mr Eliot, and sighed as he caught the implication. 'Yes, perhaps we better had. I have to attend' – his tone was apologetic – 'to so many guests at present. It is really quite a strain.'

Chown rose and moved towards the door. 'We must not hurry,' he said. 'I have known little matters of this sort – disconcerting, but by no means tragic – resist elucidation until a four hundredth consultation.' His eye grew abstracted, as if he were contemplating an invisible slot-machine of gigantic proportions. 'I grow more and more conscious, my dear Eliot, of the wonderful depth and complexity of the human mind. I would describe it, were the word not so justly suspect, as a sacred thing.' Dr Chown halted for a moment at the door, benignly meditative. 'How pleasant', he said, 'that dinner is drawing on. I have quite an appetite.' He nodded in whimsical recognition of his own human frailty and was gone.

That', said Mrs Moule, 'is Mr Kermode.'

The party was assembling for dinner in the large and nondescript room to which it had adjourned after luncheon. Though the room was large it failed quite to hold the party, or perhaps quite to fit it. The furniture was not excessive, but it seemed to be disposed in lines and masses which resented and subtly resisted the unfamiliar rhythms and manoeuvres around it. At Rust one grew up with the knowledge that the only wall-space that could be found for great-uncle Richard's moose was some five feet from the floor; as a result one never caught one's hair in its antlers or got jabbed in the nape of the neck. Though interest in Timmy's enormous collection of butterflies was entirely a thing of the past, the show-case in which it reposed still stood in the place of honour to which it had been promoted ten years before. It was unnecessary to remove it; everybody knew that since the historic scrap which its owner had fought with a visiting cousin at the age of fifteen it was a treacherous article on which to lean. And everyone was aware that the cushions on the window-seats squeaked loudly when one stood up; this was no longer the glorious Christmas novelty it had once been; it was no longer even a mild joke, but simply the way in which cushions in window-seats naturally behave. And, more simply, everyone knew the proper path from one part of the room to another; that if one attempted to pass between

the sofa before the fire and the refectory table behind it one must remember the curious Chinese footstool which had been sent to Aunt Agatha; and that if one wanted to get from that again to the table on which the drinks stood by the farther wall one must take account of the shallow step which was said – mysteriously – to be necessitated by drains.

It was a living-room – a living-room with the ineffaceable stamp of what directories call the lesser landed gentry. There was an absence of taste, without anything which could be called a lack of it. There was a great deal of solidity, a great deal of shabbiness, and just a little of the encroaching opulence of the Spider – that latter in process of being triumphantly absorbed. The books were the books which the Eliots had owned before they produced either a novelist or a student of Pope: leather-bound books, topographical, historical and genealogical, which had been occasionally consulted by great-great grandparents; three-decker novels which grandparents had read aloud to their children; parents' books, beginning with Huxley and Ruskin and Carlyle and ending with the earliest Kiplings. The walls were hung with watercolours: English watercolours of the great tradition side and side with the decently accomplished efforts of Eliot ladies. Sir Rupert had a corner crowded with stuffed fish and Sir Archie had a glass case with an unblushing model of his ill-fated bridge. It was a family room, and Mr Eliot's guests bumped rather awkwardly about it.

To that abstraction of Dr Chown's, the disinterested guest, the party might have appeared more restless than its character and hour required. This would have been particularly

so if the observer had stood by the french windows at the end of the room, for from here everything was seen against a background of massive repose. Dominating the farther wall, and in startling contrast with almost everything else in the room, was a magnificent Renoir, Mr Eliot's twenty-first birthday present to his daughter. It was a bathing woman, an exuberance of the flesh untouched by its enemy, thought, its over-opulent curves irradiated and redeemed in light, brightness falling from the air to a still, dark pool below; absolute evanescence made eternal. The guests eddied before it. Most disturbing was a fat lady who was behaving with particular animation near by; on a pair of scales she and the woman in the picture would have been almost in equipoise, and when the one stood before the other they seemed to tell the whole disheartening truth of the difference between life and art. The fat lady, unconscious of the symbolical role she thus assumed, stood firmly by the picture, occasionally uttering excited cries as she greeted or discerned her friends. It was a characteristic of the party that its composition seemed to be constantly changing, some guests trickling steadily in and others vanishing down an invisible avenue. Perhaps people were actually still arriving; others conceivably had grown tired since lunch-time and really disappeared; or it may be that these people had the habit of greeting each other over and over again.

The party was restless under the knowledge that odd things were happening at Rust. The unkind statement which had fleetingly appeared on the architrave had been calculated with some nicety. It might have seemed not so very remote from the little affair of the umbrella on grandfather Richard's bull – a type of humour

evidently normal and accepted at Rust during the present season. Nevertheless – perhaps it had been so hazardously achieved – it had indefinably suggested itself as something other than a joke; had established itself even as a move in some sinister design. The restlessness of the party could be distinguished as anticipation; all these people were waiting to see what would happen next.

But there was another current of feeling – already, while still far below the surface, making its strength felt. Neither a jest nor a plot was perhaps in question: rather what Mrs Moule, barely restraining presagements of disaster, called a manifestation. Of Mr Eliot's current creations – it was rumoured – a creature of his own creating had taken control; the house was echoing to ambiguous sounds, to ditties of no tone which had existed hitherto only in the silent paraphrase of print; to the Spider's party the Spider himself was come as a principal guest... It was fantastic; the party, though largely consisting of people who paid their way by more than common nervousity, had an over-plus of scepticism too; it was only on Mr Eliot that these obscurer speculations might be suspected as producing positive unease. Mr Eliot was putting the greatest concentration into the task of being attentive to the people about him; nevertheless he could be distinguished as moving amid some increasing isolation of his own devising. It was almost as if he had lost his grip upon the common life around him and were being carried by an invisible current towards the realm of his own melodrama, where it is necessary that small causes should produce great trepidations, and incidents innocent to the ignorant may appear as dire warnings to the instructed few.

'That', reiterated Mrs Moule, 'is Mr Kermode.' Mrs Moule had put a dashing little tiara in her silvery hair; nodding her head she sent a beam of light across the room. 'He is a sort of ghost.'

Gerald Winter looked obediently at Mr Kermode. He was a tall man with the aggressive physical presence of an athlete who is just beginning to lose form. There was certainly nothing ghostlike about Mr Kermode; he was gripping a small sausage between his teeth, holding a cocktail glass in each hand, and making low growling noises by way of conversation to the fat lady. The mild obsession which Mrs Moule had revealed at luncheon must be of the kind that strengthened its grip as the day wore on. To meet her at midnight, Winter thought, must be quite alarming. 'A sort of ghost?' he said politely. 'You surprise me.'

Mrs Moule's tiara twinkled affirmatively. 'Of course the real ghosts are almost a thing of the past; there are still a few, I believe, as relics of the bad old days. I am *quite* sure that their disappearance is the result of the better conscience in such things which comes with the spread of education. But Mr Wedge, who tries to be very cynical, declares that it is simply a matter of modern marketing methods making them unnecessary.'

The notion of the supernatural as an article of commerce was so odd that for a moment Winter could only stare. Then he understood. 'A ghost – of course. I was thinking of the wrong kind. Mr Kermode is some writer's ghost?'

'Mr Eliot's. But only a *sort* of ghost. He has written nothing for Mr Eliot so far; Mr Eliot would

never dream of letting another man's work pass as his. Only Mr Wedge feels that he must look ahead.'

'Dear me, I am afraid I am a child in such matters. You mean that this Kermode - '

'Mr Eliot', said Mrs Moule primly, 'cannot always be with us. And Mr Wedge feels that there should be someone to carry on. Mr Kermode is thought very suitable. He is quite young and the doctors have given him an excellent expectation of life, though I don't know that he is quite as steady now as he has been. At present of course, as I say, he is only studying. Satisfactorily, I believe. Mr Wedge feels that he is getting a thorough grasp.' Winter glanced at the interesting Kermode anew. His grasp at the moment was on a decanter of sherry; he had almost entirely freed his mouth of sausage and his growling noises were louder; his attitude might have been thought to express impatience. 'He knows the Spider inside out', pursued Mrs Moule, 'and is quite ready to begin.'

'This is astonishing. It really pays Wedge to keep this gentleman, so to speak, at grass?'

Mrs Moule smiled, as if in these matters Winter were a child indeed. 'It would pay him', she said briskly, 'to keep a battalion.'

'But surely if Mr Eliot died or retired from writing the fact could scarcely be kept from the public?'

A flush of indignation swept over Mrs Moule. 'You misunderstand. Mr Eliot would never sanction preparations for any deception. Mr Kermode is not going to become Mr Eliot; that will be quite unnecessary. He is simply going to become the author of the Spider stories. He will

take over Mr Eliot's unfinished manuscripts to begin with, and that will give him a start. The books completed in that way will be by Mr Eliot *and* Mr Kermode. After that Mr Kermode will simply carry on as Mr Kermode. You see, it's the Spider people have in their heads, not Mr Eliot.'

Winter nodded absently. 'Yes,' he said, 'that's true enough.'

It was the Spider one had in one's head, not Mr Eliot. And, without a personal acquaintance, Mr Eliot was something of which one could never build up even the outline. His surroundings one could guess at. Winter, from his academic seclusion, had possessed a hazy but approximately accurate notion of the environment of popular authorship. Wedge, Mrs Moule, and the little man called André he could have imagined; even Kermode failed really to surprise him; the unknown and disconcerting factor lay in Mr Eliot himself, the complex and disturbed little man who was the hub of the whole system. Winter had pictured him dimly as a pertinacious and talented scribbler, inhabiting a world wholly remote from his own. A little reflection on Timmy, he now told himself, might have afforded him some key to the truth; as it was, the truth was mildly disconcerting. Such – he thought, turning round upon himself – is the power of academico-social snobbism. It was a matter of that nose again; Mr Eliot's smell had turned out to be less remote than expected, and one result among others was a somewhat increased sympathy in the odd misfortune that had befallen him.

'And now', said Mrs Moule – who had established a clear protectorate – 'I am going to take you round and introduce you to all sorts of

interesting people. But at dinner I hope we shall be sitting together again. We shall have much in common. My brother, who is also an Oxford man, is now Bishop of Udonga.'

Winter murmured cordially, and let the murmur conceal a sigh. As a boy he had wanted to be a pirate; as a man he had discovered the single need to uncover and recover the past – *clarorum virorum facta moresque posteris tradere*. But to Mrs Moule he and the Bishop of Udonga were one. 'I hope', he said, 'that you will begin by leading me to Kermode; I feel that he will enlarge my knowledge of human nature at once.'

'Then', said Mrs Moule, 'come along.' She began to edge her way through the crush with that judicious mean between physical assertiveness and social observance which such situations require. Kermode was not in great demand; the fat lady had disengaged herself from his growls; somebody had taken the sherry decanter away from him and he was pacing up and down in a hungry way between two large chairs. The effect was quite alarmingly leonine and Mrs Moule grasped the essence of the situation at once. 'Take this,' she said in a whisper, and thrust into Winter's hands a plate of some species of naked shellfish, each transfixed by a small wooden harpoon. Winter, who was old enough to deplore the spilling-over of hors-d'oeuvres into the drawing-room and to associate the harpoons with toothpicks, took the plate dubiously. 'Mr Kermode,' said Mrs Moule, 'this is Mr Winter: Gerald Winter – Adrian Kermode.' She stood back, evidently pleased with this nice form of words; Winter murmured politely and thrust forward his offering. Kermode growled softly – a muted effect which might be put down as

gratification – and then with a single massive movement briefly shook hands and secured a little bunch of the harpoons.

‘Personally’, said Kermode, ‘I like my bite of dinner at seven o’ clock.’

Mrs Moule frowned, perhaps reflecting that if Mr Eliot’s successor had written this sentence in a school exercise-book she would have had to blue-pencil it. A moment later some acquaintance claimed her from behind and Winter and the aspiring ghost were left in single communion. ‘Don’t let it go,’ directed Kermode; ‘they seem deuced short. Just put it down here.’

Winter just put it down there. ‘You seem uncommonly hungry,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Been taking a little physical exercise? Difficult on an afternoon like this.’

Kermode looked startled; for a second his hand even suspended itself on a further journey to the plate. ‘Wise guy – hey?’ said Kermode, and rapidly swallowing shellfish he made the gesture conventionally known as thrusting out an aggressive jaw. ‘You can take it you’ve got nothing on me.’ He seemed to search briefly in his mind for some means of emphasizing his remarks. ‘No, *sir*,’ he added. His jaw resumed a position suitable for engorging molluscs.

It was to be conjectured that Kermode’s studies were at present in the armoured-car and machine-gun phase of the Spider’s development, when a transatlantic influence had been at its strongest. And that was a long time ago. Winter shook his head judicially. ‘If I may say so, you’re a good bit out of date. Things don’t stay put. Read Mencken. The argot renews itself subtly year by year.’

Kermode was startled anew; he frowned at Winter with sullen and ferocious intelligence. But when he spoke his voice had become plaintive. 'Well,' he said, 'how can I be expected to keep up with that sort of thing? They won't give me enough money to travel, and I never was much of a reading man. Do you know' – he had again possessed himself of a decanter – 'that sometimes I drink too much? You mayn't believe me, but it's quite true.'

'I assure you I don't at all disbelieve you.'

Kermode, releasing a shower of stripped harpoons, brought down a hand with great violence on Winter's shoulder. 'That's a pal,' he said; 'that's a real pal.' With an impulse of generosity he looked about him for a second glass.

'You know,' said Kermode, swallowing a glass of sherry and seeming to skip in the process several stages in a maturing friendship with Winter, 'it's galling. That's the only word, Jerry old chap: galling.'

'Gerald,' corrected Winter without unkindness. For the moment he was mildly enchanted with Kermode, deriving from him the impression that for weeks all his dealing had been with basically the same person and that here was something different – an illusion always pleasant while it lasts. 'I'm sure it is', he added sympathetically, 'very galling indeed.'

'The bread of idleness,' said Kermode. He spoke now with positive affection, but that this sentiment was sharply confined to Winter was proved by his turning with the most blood-chilling growl upon someone who had endeavoured to interrupt them. 'The bread of idleness,' he

repeated; 'you cast it on the water and never see it again.' He considered this maxim doubtfully for a moment. 'Shakespeare', he said, 'knew all about it; I often say that Shakespeare was the best of the lot of us. You remember his vagabond lag?'

'Vagabond flag, surely.'

Kermode shook his head decisively. 'You're thinking of another place; there's the deuce of a lot of Shakespeare. Like to a vagabond lag upon the stream, Goes to and back lackeying the varying tide, To rot itself with motion. Marking time, you know. And that's me.'

'Surely it's not essential to do nothing but mark time? Couldn't you be doing something on your own meanwhile?'

The ghost looked so suspicious that it seemed likely that the bread of idleness was not so wholly unpalatable to him as he suggested. 'Believe me, old man,' he said, 'it's not so easy as that. Here I have to be, waiting always on the touchline so to speak, and it's distracting – deuced distracting. Of course I lend a hand in various ways from time to time. There's a lot of work, you know, in an affair like the Spider.'

'So I suppose. By the way, are you interested in Pope?'

'I've never played it. Oh, I see what you mean: Pope. No; distinctly no. As I say, I've never been much of a reading man. Shakespeare, yes. This Pope, not.' Kermode set down his glass and stared at Winter with unexpected but convincing sagacity, like one of Landseer's lions in Trafalgar Square. 'My Spider's going to be different.'

'I'm sure it is.' Winter's agreement was convinced. 'But is that the idea?'

'Of course it is. Why has the creature had the weird success it has? Because old Eliot can throw in a pinch of culture-stuff? No, sir. Simply because friend Spider has developed and people have got to taking an interest in how he's going on like they do with growing kids. And how is he going to develop when Eliot checks out? – that's the question that's been getting Wedge. And it's why Wedge has got me. Wedge and I play games together and he knows my layout.'

Winter fleetingly wondered whether among the games which Wedge and Kermode played together was that of pretending to be somebody else. Between Kermode as he presented himself and the important office for which the astute Wedge had chosen him there seemed to be distinct discrepancy. But this again perhaps was the inexperience of the cloistered academe. Winter endeavoured to look more searchingly at his companion. The man was indeed a sort of jungle monarch, but of the travelling-menagerie sort – his fearsomeness adulterated by a dash of pathos and by incipient signs of the mange. All this was too complicated to be a disguise. Nevertheless one could believe that there was an element of dissimulation in Kermode. Prompted to explore further, Winter said encouragingly, 'You were remarking that your Spider is going to be different? You are going to develop him further?'

Kermode gripped him confidentially by the elbow. 'Wedge's idea is that I should *undevelop* him. And he thinks I have abilities that way.'

'You mean that the Spider should fall back on his old nefarious courses?' Despite himself, Winter was mildly shocked by this scheme of ink-

and-paper debauchment. During the few thousand years that we have had them our moral notions have bitten surprisingly deep; and to regenerate even a puppet merely to deprave him again is a proposal which will disturb a well-regulated mind. Winter looked at Kermode almost in dismay.

Kermode nodded. 'That's Wedge,' he said. 'And I wouldn't maintain that it isn't smart. The more you look at the run of the books' – he made a gesture which deftly called the thirty-seven volumes into being – 'the more you see in it. Nevertheless Wedge has his limitations. After all, he isn't a writing man. And I have my own ideas.' Suddenly he growled, this time at Winter indifferently with the rest of the world. 'As you're going to see.' He picked up his glass and viewed its emptiness distastefully; then, surprisingly, he thrust it into his mouth and bit it off short by the stem; a moment later it began to emerge slowly and like a maniac bubble from between his lips. 'I was taught that', he said when he had eventually ejected it, 'by my grandmother.' He looked straight at Winter and his fantastic words coupled themselves with a glance of the most lucid intelligence. 'You should try it in moments of stress.' His eyes drifted across the room. 'Well, Jerry old man' – he was faintly maudlin again – 'I'll be seeing you. Some chaps over there. Must do the polite. Lots of good fellows here tonight.'

Growling in crescendo, Kermode moved across the room. But after a few paces he made a pause and a momentary turn. 'Vagabond lag,' he said; 'that's me.'

Timmy was talking to Patricia. He believed himself – so tortuous is the commentary of

intellect upon instinct – to be doing this largely because of Hugo Toplady. The ascendancy of Hugo had filled Timmy for the time being with a nice care for the proprieties; Patricia was Belinda's special friend; it was proper that at this hour Belinda's special friend should receive the attentions of Belinda's only brother. So Timmy was offering sherry and – because he had been junior to Patricia at school – conversation a shade on the side of largeness.

Patricia accepted the sherry with caution. She felt Timmy's attitude to be indeed compounded chiefly of Toplady's correctitude, together with something of the elder Mr Eliots kind-heartedness and a certain genuine if fleeting interest of his own. Were it not that he was distinguishably scared as well she could almost have seen herself as a sort of well-preserved old lady who has spirit enough to earn the impersonal interest of the young, and who is really grateful for their passing, friendly, patronizing words. Because Timmy made her feel like this she detested him for an intolerable puppy, for another damned Barbary ape – the evening's adventure was still horridly in her head – and for a youth far from improved since the period when he had given much ingenuity to the construction of ink bombs. At the same time she liked exceedingly certain random things about him: notably his ears and his neck and the backs of his hands. And this seemed to Patricia a system of feeling so capricious and irrational that she too was scared. So she put her knees and her heels and her toes together and contemplated the largely conversing Timmy in a particularly cool and level way.

'And how', asked Timmy amiably, 'is Run-girls-run? Still time for all that?'

Patricia digested this ancient and objectionable description of female athletics and struggled against a feeling that her very presentable legs were growing gawky and aggressively muscular beneath her trailing frock. 'There's real tennis at the Abbey,' she said. 'It's a tremendous place. Have you ever been?'

'Never. And Belinda doesn't even bring home all the fun: Shoon buys this and Shoon presents that. Daddy is eager to see the Collection; he collects Pope himself, you know – only a Pope collection doesn't look at all brassy. It seems that the little man did most of his writing on the other side of the weekly bills, and the general layout is quite without dignity. Compendious, though – litterateurs can browse on the one side and economists and social historians on the other. No laborious hunting for the laundry bills as with Shelley. There they are on the other side of the poems. Incidentally, the showiest collection here is my butterflies. Come and look.'

Timmy's chatter was losing breadth and becoming disjointed, as if his mind were turning half to other things. But he led Patricia across the room and amid the eddy of Mr Eliot's guests they inspected the butterflies. Timmy expatiated on them at random – it was plain that on the whole subject of diurnal insects his mind had been long a blank – and Patricia had leisure to remember that a few minutes before she had been visited by some pleasurable reflection which now escaped her. A brief chase backwards and she caught it; it was the feeling that in Timmy there were frequent flashes of his father. A moment's consultation of her opinions of Mr Eliot senior assured her that he stood in her head as among the most charming of men. She looked again at

the backs of Timmy's hands as they lay on the show-case and felt that the drift of her thoughts gave good cause for alarm; she listened to Timmy airily entertaining the well-preserved old lady and felt that the outlook was even bleak. She and this particular Barbary ape had better part. 'Would you really like to see the Abbey?' she heard herself saying. 'I have an idea there's going to be a sort of mass invitation presently, and if so I rather hope you'll come. It's amusing – a huge and improbable fantasy from top to bottom.'

'I'm tired of fantasies.' Timmy had turned towards her, moody and increasingly scared. Their eyes met. 'Why Patricia! I'm so sorry: it was rude. And I really would like to see the Abbey. I was thinking of this chronic fantasy at home. When do you think the invite will be?'

They looked at each other for a moment in an informed silence – booked for prolonged encounter. 'What about the chronic fantasy at home?' Patricia asked abruptly.

'This series of foolish jokes and dismal ditties merely puts the lid on it. The deplorable Spider has outstayed his welcome and it's more than time that he was led into the wings. Sometimes I feel it's my business to usher him off.'

'Why ever should you feel that?'

'Because I ushered him on. The Spider was my first birthday present. Daddy felt that a son was going to be a frightfully costly luxury.'

Patricia looked Timmy critically up and down. 'Well,' she said, 'wasn't he right? I imagine your running costs aren't particularly low.'

'No doubt. But nowadays the family is absolutely affluent and the stories go on just because there are so many people shoving. It's intolerable. I think that daddy and everyone would be better with the Spider killed off. Perhaps this funny-business will do the trick. Perhaps that's the idea.'

Patricia put down her glass. Timmy was wilful. There were qualities in his father which had been wilfulness thirty years ago; the mood was something born in him. 'To kill off the Spider?' she said. 'Let's hope that the idea isn't to kill off his inventor – at midnight.'

Timmy looked momentarily startled; then he smiled with an effect of intolerable confidence in his own judgement. 'I've had one or two uneasy moments. But daddy is astonishingly resilient. You know' – he stretched himself slowly as if tugging at an oar – 'I'm not sure that I'm not the joker myself.'

'I don't think that at all a good idea.'

'Or it may very well be Belinda.'

'Worse.'

'Don't you know that Belinda is absolutely ruthless?'

'Yes.'

'I wonder' – Timmy went off at a tangent – 'if *you* are? How awful if sisters give one the whole truth about women. The theory is that there's another side.'

'Timmy' – inexplicably Patricia was really cross – 'it couldn't be you. The thing began with a telephone call to your father while you were in the room with him.'

'That', said Timmy gravely, 'gave me the idea. Will you have another glass of sherry?' She shook her head, angry and almost frightened. 'That was just an isolated joke of the sort that does from time to time occur. And it gave me or Belinda of course the idea. Do you think we shall bring it off?'

Everybody's nerves were strained. Patricia seized upon this fact as a working basis and looked at Timmy anew. He was lazily proposing to try out on her the role of magnetic young criminal such as might be conceived by Peter Holme. Partly it was the family taste for dramatics; partly it was something real in him, however fragmentary. This was a new – or an enlarged – view of Timmy. But his ears and his hands remained the same.

Patricia, seemingly doomed to double disgrace that day, felt tears coming into her eyes. She made another grab at the larger proportions of the situation and said calmly, 'I'm sure I wish it were. You, I mean.'

Timmy's pose slid from him. He looked at her uncertainly. '*Spiderismus* bores you too?'

'Not at all. If it's you I wish you thoroughly bad luck. I say I rather hope it is because then I shall be barking up a wrong tree myself.'

He uncoiled like a spring and stood looking down at her in her low chair from a comical height. 'Patricia – you bark up trees?' He swayed his arms like branches in a wind.

They laughed – but Patricia felt that the momentary tension had left uncomfortable pressure ridges on her mind. 'Barking up trees is in my family, as romancing and posing is in yours. If you – or Belinda – are the joker you are

unlikely to go to certain extremes I've had in my head.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Do you know that Belinda has asked down my brother?'

'I don't know – but how nice.'

'Belinda has asked him and I've hurried him up. He'll be here for dinner. He's a policeman.'

'He's *what*?'

'A policeman. I'm afraid Mr Toplady will find it very strange. But the unfortunate Applebys have had to get along on their brains.'

Timmy blushed and for a moment was reduced to a mumble. 'I say, you don't really think that – well, the joker is going to do something extreme?'

'I think' – Patricia glanced round the room – 'that at the moment something quite moderate would have a considerable effect.'

'I rather think it would. Did you say your brother was coming for dinner?' He glanced at his watch. 'If so, they're both late. Do you see Belinda over there? Her inner eye is on the kitchen. The resources of Rust are a bit overtaxed, as they say, and disaster is only too probable. I think' – he began to sidle positively awkwardly away – 'I'll go out and see what's doing.'

She watched him out of the room. Her feelings were confused. Perhaps they might have been sorted out into a realization that there are no fairy princes in this world, but only young men with necks and hands which emerge beautifully from their clothes, and characters which emerge

much more problematically from their conversation. From all this she tilted away her chin – and then she remembered that John, as well as the dinner, was fifteen minutes late. Probably it was a puncture; perhaps it was an accident. She tilted up her chin farther and found herself contemplating a cluster of soft electric globes concealed in a large chandelier. Her eye was following the line of this when it vanished. For a moment a ghostly simulacrum of the room – Timmy's butterflies, Rupert's fish, Archie's bridge, Belinda's Renoir, and Mr Eliot's guests – flickered on her retina. Then that vanished too. In the living-room at Rust a universal darkness had buried all.

The shock produced absolute silence – a silence which was instantly caught and held on a chain of remote, sinister sound. From above, from outside – impossible to tell – came the faint tap-tap of a stick falling at measured paces on a hard surface. As if the listeners were hurtling at an incredible speed towards some enormous ticking clock, the sound grew in volume stroke by stroke, rose unbearably to a climax no louder than the fall of an axe across a broad field, ebbed away.

Patricia heard Belinda's voice, cold with anger, at her ear.

'The tap', said Belinda, 'of the stick of the blind secretary of the Spider.'

A murmur, a babel of voices mounting swiftly through surprise, anxiety, fright towards the lower reaches of panic, filled the living-room at Rust. When light came it came bewilderingly, an arc sweeping diagonally from the skirting board to halt by the ceiling, and falling, the more collected could discern, through a lightly curtained french window from the terrace without. The babel of mere exclamations and cries was cut by a scream – it was Kermode's fat lady; and by one of the odd tricks of communication which crisis brings the eyes of the company were drawn to the window. The curtain, now a sort of illuminated canvas like a cinematographic screen, showed the lurching silhouette of a man. The silhouette advanced, grew colossal, diminished again. There was a crack as of a window wrenched roughly open; the curtain was flung back; the light grew to a blaze and revealed itself as from the headlights of a car. A voice – ordinary, but combining volume with calm to an extent which constituted an elocutionary feat – said, 'Be quiet. There is no danger.' And, as if great valves had been closed, everything was still.

Patricia, who had sprung to her feet with the darkness, found Belinda still standing beside her. 'If the joker', she said in a slightly unsteady voice, 'hasn't built up a stunning entrance for John.'

'No danger at all,' reiterated John Appleby. He spoke with the advancing briskness of a physician who is consolidating his hold on anxious relatives. 'As far as I could see, the whole house went into darkness at once, so it may be a matter of a main fuse. I have a torch here, if anyone cares to investigate.' He stepped into the room.

It was like an amateur stage on which something has gone badly wrong with the lighting and the rehearsing simultaneously. In the tunnel of prickling illumination from the car the guests moved uneasily, conscious that they had been on the verge of participating in an embarrassing scene. The amenities of civilization will sometimes let us down with a bump, and the normally tuned mind is prepared for the isolated occasions on which the machine fails. It had failed at Rust now, and the effect, as Patricia had half prophesied, was considerable. For an atmosphere – the sort of atmosphere which Mr Eliot liked to build up in his romances – was building itself up in the house; Appleby, contemplating the scene from the window, was instructed by glances which were going sidelong over nervous shoulders. On this miscellaneous crowd funny-business was getting a grip.

Mr Eliot emerged and there were brief introductions. 'Patricia's brother?' he said. 'Dear me, the day is full of surprises, and this is a most pleasant one. Your arrival was most opportune, as well as a capital thing in itself. I am afraid I failed badly in not immediately calling out a reassuring word. But the fact is that I was reminded of something odd and taken, I fear, rather by surprise. The *deus ex machina* is a much abused phrase, but on this occasion not inappropriate. And you are happy' – when Mr

Eliot let himself quote Pope he usually did so with the utmost unobtusiveness – ‘to catch us just at dinner-time. But to examine the fuses is, as you say, an excellent idea. I must apologize to everybody for this discomfort. Please all stay here while Mr Appleby and I go and investigate.’

If Timmy, Patricia reflected, had flashes of Mr Eliot, Mr Eliot had his moments of being like Timmy. Disturbed, his conversation would break down into chatter – and certainly he was disturbed now. He gave the impression of having drifted farther away. From absence of mind and mild distraction he had passed earlier in the evening to a phase of strenuous concentration on the world immediately about him. Now he was gay. The trick of illumination from within was on him again, but it might have been fancied as an almost fevered light, with a hectic rather than its old lambent quality. Patricia looked at John and John looked at Patricia. And John’s glance said, Yes, that it was curious enough, and that he forgave her for hauling him down. A moment later he flicked on his torch and followed his host through the door. The room had fallen silent again; their steps and the ever so slightly too rapid voice of Mr Eliot faded down the corridor.

Mr Eliot’s butler held the torch – nervously, for he had left Mr Eliot’s cook groping in the last distraction in the kitchen. The lad who was promoted on party occasions to the position of a sort of untwinned footman held the steps – unnecessarily, for Appleby’s balance was secure enough. Two palourmaids whom nobody had thought to dismiss held something like their peace. Mr Eliot himself held a candle which he waved to an effect of slight confusion above his

head. Perhaps because of the complicated electric pipes, the wall was a maze of metres, switches, and fuse-boxes.

'Really,' said Mr Eliot, whom some inner impulsion urged still to unnecessary speech, 'you seem, my dear Mr Appleby, to have the whole complicated installation at your finger-tips. May I ask you are an electrical engineer?'

'I'm afraid not. As a matter of fact' – even amid this little squad of domestic assistants it would be better to tell the truth at once – 'I'm a policeman. I work in the CID at Scotland Yard.'

Mr Eliot's candle side-slipped, steadied itself. 'The CID?' He pronounced the letters as blankly as if he had never peopled that institution with a score of imaginary officers; a moment later he seemed to recollect himself. 'This is interesting indeed; I had no idea that Patricia had a brother so picturesquely employed. We shall be able to break a lance together, you and I. And truth will no doubt prove stranger than fiction once more.'

Appleby smiled cheerfully down. 'Truth', he said idly, 'is truth, and fiction is fiction – and here are the two meeting in the dark.'

There was a little silence. 'Do you think' – the voice from below was suddenly strained – 'that you can locate the trouble?' It paused and added – as if afraid that it had too abruptly changed tone – 'my dear fellow?'

Appleby, who seldom touched a nerve without intending it, frowned into the darkness. 'I've located it. As I thought, it's a big fuse that's blown. And there' another, complete in its frame, that can be slipped in. There.' A faint click came from above; Rust was flooded once more from a hundred points of light.

The parlourmaids scuttled, the lad made off with the steps, the butler switched off the electric torch and stood contemplating his employer's efficient guest with an expression of deference which was substantially genuine; the gentleman's vocation might be out of the way, but he had drawn order from chaos and in the kitchens the situation was as good as saved. 'Dinner', said Mr Eliot's butler to Mr Eliot – with the air of calling attention to a less spectacular but still meritorious conjuring trick of his own – 'will be served in five minutes.' And upon this the gentleman from the CID stripped off his overcoat and revealed himself as being as decently dinner-jacketed as anybody. Mr Eliot's butler, a last shade of anxiety dismissed from his mind, bowed and withdrew.

The nerve-centre of Rust's electric supply stood in a small room off the hall, from which it was separated by a glass door identical with that of the telephone-room opposite. Mr Eliot, left alone with his new guest, appeared in two minds whether to linger in this retreat with the solitary unknown or to hasten back to the multitudinous and familiar elsewhere. He glanced through the glass door to the hall, where was only the retreating figure of the manservant; he glanced up at the array on the wall, and Appleby noticed that his gaze went competently enough to the fuse that had been concerned. And then his eye turned to his companion; an eye presaging a critical question. 'Mr Appleby – I suppose you are peculiarly qualified to say – does it appear to have been accidental?'

Appleby knew enough of the situation to understand that Mr Eliot had reason to apprehend malice; he knew nothing of the tapping which

had followed the blackout. It was pleasant to open relations with a reassuring word. 'Why, yes,' he said. 'The fuse was genuinely blown; one can tell. It appears to have been a mere accident.'

Mr Eliot made an odd movement; he was spinning oddly on his heel; he was a crumple of black and white clothes on the black and white tessellated floor... And from far away, fainter than the faintest sounding of Siegfried's distant horn, falling in its exhausted little cadences like a slow curtain on some accomplished scene, came the ebbing melody of the clarinet.

Dinner was served at eight twenty-five, with Mr Eliot at the head of his table. Only Appleby had witnessed his collapse; consequently there was only Appleby to meditate on it. He had seen such tricks of the over-taxed mind before: on the physical side quickly over, but on the psychical holding tenaciously to the oblivion at which they are directed. Mr Eliot had forgotten; for the time being had comprehensively forgotten the blackness which had fallen upon his guests and the redness which had been scrawled above them; had forgotten the sounds which were beginning to drift out of his books and about the corridors of Rust; had forgotten Mrs Birdwire and the vicar and the schoolmistress and all that had followed in their train. For a blessed space the Spider slumbered again within his ink and paper walls; this party was as the party last year and the year before: something which pleased Wedge, and a number of other people no doubt capital in their way besides; the necessary annual complement of the curious but really frequently amusing way in which he had come to make an abundant living for Timmy and Belinda and

Rupert and Archie and himself. It would soon be over, and meantime not even the large stuffed spider which somebody had suspended above the dinner-table could be regarded as seriously disturbing. The Spider was in his cupboard and all right with the world.

Approximately these, thought Appleby, were his host's mental processes. The result for the moment was a restored nervous equilibrium round the table, but the processes could hardly be regarded as promising in themselves. The mind does not devise such emergency measures save when hard-pressed; nor are they ever workable for long. If he were to be helpful he must move tolerably fast, and so far he possessed only inadequate sketches of the facts: Patricia's letter, with Belinda's invitation to come down; the beguiling if extravagant hypothesis with which Patricia had provided him on the telephone... He looked discreetly about the table.

He saw – because his vision was arduously trained – that Belinda Eliot was acknowledging to herself that twenty-five minutes' marking time had been none too good for the soup; that his sister was trying to make up her mind about a young man who must be Timmy Eliot; that Timmy Eliot was guiltily considering the possibility of playing truant on another and serious young man sitting near by; that a plump little man slightly resembling Mr Eliot had drunk a little too much on an empty stomach; that a large and ferocious man near the foot of the table had drunk much too much in the same condition; that most of the company knew of himself merely as the late arrival who had somewhat dramatically prevented minor panic; that the old lady sitting beside him knew a little more. All of which was

scarcely useful. He was attempting further observation when the old lady spoke.

'I'm afraid', said the old lady, in what was evidently a formula, 'that introductions are never thought necessary at this party. May I be very unconventional and say that I am Mrs Moule? You will sometimes see my name in *teeny* letters on—'

'On the playbills,' said Appleby. 'It's very nice to meet you. I am John Appleby, Patricia's brother.'

Mrs Moule blushed – not faintly but vividly, like Mr Disney's dwarf. Appleby wrote her down in a businesslike way as a friend for the duration of the adventure. It was wonderful how useful a habit of retaining useless information sometimes proved. Mrs Moule laid a light hand on his sleeve. 'Belinda', she said in a low voice, 'has confided in me.'

One down, thought Appleby, to Belinda. But perhaps there was extenuating circumstance.

Mrs Moule seemed to catch at his thought. 'But Belinda is very discreet. I wouldn't like to say that I have tried to be a mother to her, because it is a thing so *many* people tend to say of motherless children. But we have always been very friendly. She is a delightful girl. Perhaps a *teeny* bit modern, but of course that is to be expected.'

Appleby agreed that it was to be expected that the young should be on the modern side. Mrs Moule said that the modern mind, though in many ways an improvement on the sorts of mind that had gone before, was inclined to be narrow. In five minutes Appleby was possessed of all Mrs Moule's convictions on the unaccountable element in human affairs. 'And now', said Mrs Moule, 'I am

going to introduce you to Gerald Winter; I have been keeping him to myself for ever such a long time.'

Winter was on Mrs Moule's other side; the introduction was effected across her bosom and to the animated twinkling of her tiara. 'Mr Winter', said Mrs Moule, 'is from Oxford. My brother, who is now Bishop of Udonga, though not at the same college, proves to have been at one almost next door.'

Appleby, whose mind had been wandering during the latter part of Mrs Moule's discourse, was momentarily at a loss for a suitable opening observation: the propinquity of Mr Winter's college to that of the Bishop of Udonga was singularly barren of suggestion. Winter, however, immediately took charge of the conversation. 'To be introduced', he said, 'as coming from Oxford: how exceedingly uninformative that is nowadays! A hundred odd years ago it meant that one was either a clergyman, a quasi-clergyman, or a dangerous democrat. Now the other fellow cannot be sure that one is not a micro-chemist, a trades-union secretary, a lover of Tamil and Telugu, or an international authority on the bacon industry. If the introduction is indistinct and takes place in the dark one's sex is a matter of pure conjecture, and one's complexion as likely to be black, yellow, or coffee as the traditional pinko-grey.'

'I think', said Mrs Moule, 'that the universities are wonderfully unchanging places.'

'You are mistaken; the pace is quite dizzying at both of them. At Oxford we have seen everything turned topsy-turvy within a generation. When our minds mellow and become disinclined for the sort of operations which distinguish a brisk civil-servant we are retired to little villas on the

fringes of the town. The streets are thronged with learned ladies who have their more natural place in the poems of Lord Tennyson. Strange subjects are professed in the Schools: the bacon industry again, and even English literature – a lore hitherto properly confined to academics and to the native colleges of India.’ Winter paused briefly to sip hock. Appleby had time to reflect that the universities do indeed change, and this youngish aged don must be one of that diminishing remnant which continues to consult the art of dining out. Mr Eliot’s dinner-table was still far from easy, but one corner at least would produce a smooth flow of talk.

‘The dead languages’, continued Winter with the practised modulations which preserve a monologue from being a harangue, ‘which have been the most truly living languages for a matter of millennia, are now dying indeed. Boys come up from great public schools scarcely able to latinize their neck-verse. They have to be taught that Virgil and Sophocles were writers admired by Spenser and Milton: that a tragedy is a song of the goat; that “phonograph” is made up of two Greek words and that with the spread of the machine that name has passed into popular usage.’ He turned to Mrs Moule. ‘Do the people’, he asked with deft inconsequence, ‘really say “phonograph”? They do not. But it is the innocence of these cloistral beliefs, after all, that is their charm.’ He switched his eye to Appleby, the little climax at which he was aiming within sight. ‘Adorable dreamer,’ he quoted, ‘home of lost causes and forsaken beliefs and unpopular names’ his voice dropped gracefully ‘where a gramophone is a phonograph still!’

Fancy stuff, thought Appleby dispassionately, nicely done. But again, surely, only faintly instructive. He was meditating a little steering of the conversation on his own behalf when a voice broke in from the other side of the table. The tones, Appleby happened to know, were those of a publisher called Spandrell; it was with mild astonishment that he marked them as proceeding from somebody quite unfamiliar to him. 'Don't, said the voice querulously and unnecessarily, 'speak of the universities to me. I see them as being at the bottom of the whole mischief.'

'The mischief?' said Winter, whose conversational equipment appeared to include a knowledge of when interpolation was expected. 'Surely we are not mischievous? Commonly we are thought sedate.'

'The universities have come to exercise a markedly depressant effect on the whole field of literary activity. Nobody is allowed to come down from Oxford nowadays lightly proposing to fill long-felt literary wants. Their noses have been rammed into the accumulated stuff in the libraries and that discourages them. Contrast the situation with Wordsworth and his crowd.'

'A Cambridge man, I have heard,' said Winter with sudden appalling academic facetiousness.

'It seems that at the university nobody bothered to ram these people's noses into anything. As a result they came down with the proper feelings: that the whole writing job was substantially yet to do. And the results were first-rate. The Wordsworth alone wrote and published some seventy thousand lines of verse during his lifetime; and even then there were some tens of thousands left over for posthumous handling. Contrast that, I say, with the corresponding

situation today.' The pseudo-Spandrell tapped the table with an irritable finger.

'But surely, Mr Wedge,' expostulated Mrs Moule, 'quantity isn't *everything*.'

Less and less, Appleby reflected, to any possible point. But one never knew. He listened on. The *salmi*, he noted, had come through the twenty-five minutes unscathed.

'It was different', continued the man called Wedge, dropping Spandrell's manner but conceivably preserving Spandrell's argument, 'when one was a publisher and nothing else, contracting with an independent printer job by job. It wasn't all vital then that one's writers should keep on writing all the time. But now when one is a printer as well, with hundreds of tons of that frightfully expensive machinery depreciating year by year-' Growing suddenly bored with his own remarks, Mr Wedge broke off and applied himself to his dinner.

'One sees', said Winter smoothly – and Appleby realized that there was to be neither chink nor crevice in the flow of talk – 'your point of view. And I don't doubt that the universities have something of the effect you ascribe to them. The university man is trained' – his eyes strayed to Mr Eliot in the distance, his mind made an answering dive at Mr Eliot's favourite author – 'not to rhyme ere he wakes and print before Term ends. If one is speaking grandly one calls the thing critical sense. But, as I say, I admit your point of view. The machines, no doubt, must be kept moving; it is the character of their kind. Stop press: only a murder or the result of a horse-race may be allowed to do that. That the machine should even be slowed down by the critical sense of writers would be highly inconvenient.' He sipped hock

again; there was the faint suggestion of a piece of stage business about the act. 'There is, for example, our host's son, Timmy Eliot.'

Of what Timmy Eliot was an example was momentarily obscure – and therefore momentarily interesting. The man, Appleby reflected again, handled his conversational knives and forks nicely enough.

'Timmy probably has the literary mind. When you get to know him you find him observing his own poses in a disinterested way, and that is the basis of imaginative literature. He can be tenaciously ingenious and inventive; clearly another characteristic. In a former age he might have become an impudent little playwright, or even an authentic minor poet. As it is, this particular university atmosphere of which you are speaking has given him a surfeit of literary attitudes and he is inclined to go after other things. The press will rust, for all that he will do for it. He is thinking of the Foreign Office, or something of the sort. One imagines he would find it desiccated; but that is the proposal at the moment. It would be most unfair to call Timmy a snob. Nevertheless, the idea reveals a certain direction of interests, does it not?' Winter's eyes flickered for a moment on Appleby's and returned to his plate by way of the grotesque creature which had been suspended above the table. 'Mrs Moule, I challenge you to shut your eyes and tell me how many legs there are to a spider.'

'Thirty-seven,' interrupted the man Wedge mysteriously. He guffawed pleasedly over his glass.

There occurred – largely because Gerald Winter was particularly fond of asparagus cropping up

out of season – a local lull. Conversation from farther down the table was wafted to Appleby.

‘Fifteen per cent to five thousand,’ a fat woman was saying rapidly; ‘twenty per cent to ten thousand and twenty-five per cent beyond. You see?’

The man sitting beside her was cadaverous and sad. ‘Yes,’ he said; ‘yes, I see.’ He spoke as if what he saw were a vision tolerably in the middle distance.

‘But now, suppose that x sells ten thousand and one copies in six months. Then y will begin at twenty per cent and if y sells fifteen thousand and one copies in six months z will begin at twenty-five per cent. And so on. You see?’

‘No,’ said the cadaverous man, sadly but firmly. ‘No, I don’t see that.’

‘But it’s perfectly simple. To begin with you write three books: x , y , and z . You understand that?’

‘Yes,’ said the cadaverous man, brightening. ‘Oh, yes. I can understand that perfectly.’ Their voices were lost in a drift of talk from elsewhere.

‘I am afraid,’ said Mrs Moule apologetically, ‘that the subject of authors’ royalties is one which they find – which we find, I ought to say – *rather* absorbing. It seems a pity, don’t you think? But I suppose it is inevitable. I read a book the other day which suggested that Shakespeare himself took a considerable interest in such matters. And it appears that he became quite prosperous not so much because he wrote those wonderful plays as because he got in on owning theatres, and that sort of thing.’ Mrs Moule paused and

frowned. '*As because,*' she said. 'I wonder if that is *quite* grammatical?'

And now, thought Appleby, we have got very far from the point indeed. 'You must tell me', he said firmly to Mrs Moule, 'something about all these interesting people. The man, for instance, who has difficulty in understanding the talk of the stout lady.'

'That's Gilbert Overall.'

'I don't think I've heard of him.'

'Nor' – Winter shook his head decidedly – 'have I. One couldn't forget a name like that.'

'You put the finger', said Mrs Moule, whose conversation was briskening under the influence of Mr Eliot's wine, 'on the core of the situation. People simply refuse to have heard of Mr Overall. And I fear he has come to resent it.'

Winter nodded comprehendingly. 'The irritable genus of writers – resentful of neglect and restive under commendation. This Overall, you will tell us, is his saturnine self because a public refuses to have heard of him?'

'Yes. It is really so sad.'

'Dear lady' – Winter, Appleby conjectured, was restive beneath his urbane talk – 'let us remember Keats and cheer up. And it is the same, you know, with scholars – indeed, their form of the disease is more extreme. I have known a man, held in almost universal esteem, fall into a melancholy and thence to a decline simply because this refusal-to-have-heard-of-him attitude was maintained by a single other scholar at the thither end of the world.'

'Is Overall', asked Appleby, 'a novelist?'

'Indeed he is; he writes rather the same sort of stories as Mr Eliot. To put the situation more exactly, Mr Eliot has virtually driven him off the market.'

'Driven him off the market!' exclaimed Winter in astonishment. 'How very strange. I should have imagined that in such a popular sphere of literature as our friend's there would be ample room for all.'

Mrs Moule nodded her tiara vigorously. 'In a general way you would be quite right. But anything can happen in the writer's profession.'

Wedge, who had been for some time in a profound abstraction, awoke as to a battle-cry. 'Anything', he agreed vigorously, 'can happen in the book trade.' He fell into abstraction anew.

'I have no doubt', continued Mrs Moule with spirit, 'that it is because I have been mixed up with books so long that I have what Mr Winter considers laughable notions on how the universe is governed. Their ways are wholly unaccountable. Mr Winter, do you know how a best-seller comes into being?'

'Certainly not.'

'Nor does anyone else. Do you know why people don't buy books?'

'Well, approximately – yes.'

'Quite so. But when they do buy a book do you know why they do it?'

'I have no idea at all.'

'Exactly. And neither has anyone else – not even Mr Wedge. But about Mr Overall; his experience is just part of this general mysteriousness of books. When Mr Eliot's novels

underwent their last development – and you know they are famous for developing – the result was that they came rather into Mr Overall's territory; he has been trying to get just the sort of effects Mr Eliot was now getting. I am afraid he was quite resentful about it, maintaining that Mr Eliot had deliberately adopted his manner – whereas really Mr Eliot was just another of the people to whom Mr Overall and his work were unknown. All of which would scarcely have mattered but for this very odd and exceptional behaviour on the part of the public. The public stopped reading the Overall books. Mr Eliot added a few thousands to his readers and Mr Overall lost most of his. And I maintain that it is rather sad. Mr Winter will tell me to remember Rembrandt and cheer up. But Rembrandt was a genius and could lose a public in a good cause and not care a damn' – Mrs Moule looked surprised at the vigour of her own language – 'whereas Mr Overall is just a black-coated breadwinner like the rest of us.'

Winter, obliquely challenged, shook his head. 'My heart' – his voice was decently lowered – 'is stony. And will continue so even if you summon up an anxious Mrs Overall surrounded by a band of hungry little Bibs and Tuckers.' He contemplated this jest for a moment as if it had not come out very well. 'I am more interested in Overall's being here now. Surely it is a somewhat uncomfortable situation?'

Mrs Moule glanced in evident embarrassment across the table. 'Mr Overall', she said, 'is one of Mr Wedge's authors.' As if determined to leave it at that she took a large bite of what was in front of her.

Wedge looked cautiously about him. 'Everything', he said, 'is put down to me. And it's true I got Overall to Rust; I think it's going to do him a bit of good.'

Appleby looked down the table at Overall and wondered just what sort of benefit was being planned. Perhaps Overall was simply to be fattened up at his successful rival's charge. If so, the plan was a failure. Overall sat like a spectre at the board and ate with the gloomiest restraint.

'Old Gib Overall,' continued Wedge, sliding into a vein of sentiment which was presumably some other man's; 'we *must* distribute him, after all.' He appeared to place this virtuous sentiment on the table in front of him and contemplate it admiringly. 'And we can't sell him as a man Eliot walked in on. It wouldn't be true.' He shook his head judiciously. 'What's more, it wouldn't work. But why not sell him as a man walking in on Eliot?'

'Would that', asked Appleby innocently, 'be true?'

'In three months it can be gospel. Overall has only to trim a little here and there and he'll be chasing Eliot clearly enough. And put that way round something may be done with him.'

'To be retired mind', said Winter, 'it appears a little hard on Overall.'

'Dear old Gib.' Wedge sighed with an excess of benevolence which yet implied that sacrifices must be made for benefits to be received. 'If we can only set him up as a demi-semi-Spider he's a made man.'

'I cannot but feel' – Winter was looking with a bland sideways glance at Appleby – 'that we are

surrounded by mystery. By what, I mean, Mrs Moule calls the mystery of books. In the Bodleian books appear to behave in the most decorous way; I have never once detected them in skittishness or impropriety. Or perhaps you know the Reading Room in the British Museum? Have you ever been startled by anything untoward in their conduct there? Frankly, I have not. But in the great world—' He left his solemn foolery delicately in the air.

Appleby was going over in his mind what he remembered about Alexander Pope. Pope had written a long poem, the *Dunciad*, entirely given over to ridicule of the dull and unsuccessful writers of his day. Not a very nice or charitable thing to do, for Pope himself had made a very good thing of the profession of letters; had been quite an Eliot, in fact, in his own superior sphere. There was here something to explore, and once more he appealed to Mrs Moule. 'I gather, then, that Overall is here for a little publicity, and as a hitherto wandering meteorite to be absorbed into the orbit of the Spider.' The atmosphere of Rust seduced one to picturesque if inexact literary metaphor. 'But what of his relations to our host? You seemed to suggest that he is a little resentful of the way things have gone.'

Mrs Moule looked nervously around. But the party was hotting up; its animation had returned to it with interest and their talk was securely islanded in noise. 'I think it natural', she said carefully, 'that Mr Overall should feel a little sore. And I believe that he is of a somewhat morose temper to begin with. But Mr Eliot's conduct would be so irreproachable in any situation—'

'It was rather that aspect that I had in mind.' Appleby proceeded cautiously, for he sensed that

Mrs Moule's attitude to Mr Eliot was something like that which, in a cosmic poem, the moon might be represented as bearing to the sun. 'Mr Eliot himself would never do anything to make Overall bear him an active personal grudge?'

'Oh, no!'

Mrs Moule's denial was a shade too eager. Appleby tried again – more cautiously still, for he had come to the really delicate point. 'It is just that it has occurred to me that there is something about Mr Eliot which might be very irritating to – to people in Overall's situation. I haven't seen much of him and I can't express it very well. It's Rust, I think, and the army and his antiquarian interest. It could be twisted into general sense that he is a superior amateur who has stepped in and scooped the pool, and who' – Appleby looked warily at the lady who dramatized for Mr Eliot – 'is secretly a little disdainful of the whole business.'

To Appleby's relief the tiara twinkled in a sort of modified agreement. 'Disdainful is not quite the right word, Mr Appleby. Mr Eliot is much too' – she cast about for an adequate expression – '*Shakespearian*. I mentioned that I had been reading a book about Shakespeare? It seems that the absurdities of his theatre and simplicity of his audience's taste made him restless at times, but *not* disdainful. And Mr Eliot' – it clearly gave Mrs Moule great satisfaction thus ingeniously to equate the two – 'is *just* like Shakespeare in that regard.' She paused to make this point doubly emphatic. 'But of course I know what you mean. Mere success like Mr Eliot's is likely to alienate a great many people, and Mr Eliot does give a *teeny* impression that the books are something which he brings out from the nursery cupboard.'

And it's true, too, that he *is* rather inclined' – Mrs Moule hesitated, blushed, came firmly to a full stop. 'But after all, we *are* at Mr Eliot's dinner-table.'

Appleby, thus reduced to the inquisitive policeman, held his peace. Winter came to the rescue. 'Very true,' he murmured, 'very true. But we are all concerned to get to the bottom of these unfortunate jokes, and it will be as well to pool all the information we have.' He cast about the table a look of exaggerated caution which emphasized their isolation; even Wedge was now talking absorbedly to one of his neighbours.

'Yes,' said Mrs Moule; 'very well. I was going to say that Mr Eliot is a little inclined – it's difficult to express – to an occasional mild sadism.' She cast about for means to throw this into an amiable light. 'Mr Eliot', she added, 'is such a finely complex man!'

Appleby saw irritation and outrageousness hovering in Winter's eye; he hastened to interpose a modified outrageousness himself. 'You mean', he said, 'that he will sometimes throw fireworks at the cat – that kind of thing?'

Mrs Moule was indignant. 'Certainly not; nothing of the sort! I merely mean that he will sometimes amuse himself by teasing and even tormenting people in an ironical way. Mr Eliot has such a command of irony. We must regard it' – Mrs Moule took one of her inconsequent dips into the schoolmistressing past – 'as one of the higher literary forms.'

'And Eliot' – Winter was still restless – 'badgers people with this higher literary form? That is most interesting. Mr Appleby's mind, I am quite sure, is on Pope.'

'As you say,' said Appleby equably, 'my mind is on Pope. Would Mr Eliot' – he turned to Mrs Moule – 'amuse himself after that fashion; by writing lampoons, say, on people like Overall? Might he make enemies as result of that sort of thing getting round?'

Mrs Moule looked startled. 'Well, I don't think he would show them round. I myself have seen only one in years.'

'Ah!' Winter interrupted in a heavy forensic manner. 'Then they do exist.'

'I suppose they do. I've seen only one set of verses of the sort; it was about Mr Wedge, and *most* amusing.'

'With the true Papinian barb?'

'*Quite* with the true barb.' Mrs Moule smiled as at a thoroughly satisfactory reminiscence, and then checked herself. 'It is a curious trait', she added conscientiously, 'in so kind-hearted a man as Mr Eliot. But, you know, I wasn't thinking of lampoons, or anything of that sort, when I spoke of mild sadism.'

'Then', said Winter with a hint of impatience, 'what were you thinking of?'

'Why' – Mrs Moule spoke with the surprise of one to whom an answer is obvious – 'I was thinking of poor Sir Archibald, of course.'

Appleby took a moment to place poor Sir Archibald in his mind; this name had figured in Patricia's account in the most fleeting way. 'Sir Archibald Eliot? Well, now you must tell me about him.'

It was too late. Belinda had caught the fat lady's eye. Lightly and ponderously, gracefully

and awkwardly, the women were preparing to troop from the room.

Rust Hall withdrew farther into darkness, like some untidy but mellow little monster of burrowing habits going to earth with the night. The monster had four heads and not much else – it was in this that its untidiness consisted – and each head, couched low on the ground, had peered all day through mist and rain towards a different quarter of the compass. In the fabric were stones which Chaucer might have paused by the wayside to watch the fashioning of, but the first distinguishable fragments were of the fifteenth-century manor house which faced the east. This was still the dominating façade when Leland passed – the house, he recorded, ‘reasonably well-built of stone and timbar’ and having a glimpse through its park of that prosperous little market town of Rust which Camden had called *emporium non inelegans*. The later sixteenth century had seen a right-about turn; Rust Hall now faced the heath and furze of the west – *bruaria*, says Camden – and its back, itself mouldering, was discreetly to a Rust which some shifting rural balance was bringing to the first verge of decay. This was the period of the emergence of the Eliots; stretching out firmly acquisitive hands from counters and warehouses in the city of London they possessed themselves of the manor and several properties adjoining; buying here, stealing there, and sometimes using a growing interest at court to achieve a judicious mean between the two. The

seventeenth century had seen the house peopled with gentlemen now grossly gay and now portentously moral and scientific after the fashion of the Restoration, but all of them forgetful of commerce save at an orthodox second-hand; these turned south and built an imposing little Caroline front, adorned with statues botched by a Fleming out of an unfamiliar stone, and rising to gables which stood against the sky in convolutes and scrolls, almost florid and almost – many an Eliot thought – fit to crown a nobleman's seat. For more than a hundred years this constituted the front of Rust Hall, and then the eighteenth century, turning away from the prospect of pastures which broke at an invisible distance in cliffs to the sea, built solidly to the north a classical screen and portico, with cyclops' eye in the middle which seemed to keep watch over the pleasing and undistinguished arable country – Eliot land to the horizon on a sufficiently misty day – like an impassive steward. And this was the farthest that Rust Hall attained on the road to the imposing. The Eliot fortunes took an ill turn. Wits reputatble but dull, wits keen but reckless followed upon each other for some fatal generations. There was no more building and not very much money for paint. The fabric deteriorated and cracks appeared along the main joining lines, as if the centuries were going to sever themselves by fissure into their independent constituent parts. The arrival of Mr Richard Eliot, drifting into the estate on the deaths of sundry cousins and a brother, drifting soon afterwards into the command of unlimited underpinning and Queen Anne's white, averted the threatened destruction. Heterogeneous but not undistinguished, Rust Hall prospered again.

It had faded now into the entire darkness of a starless winter night. Though not rambling, it was confused; though long since fallen into some sort of harmony to the eye, it was yet incoherent and baffling to the exploring foot: an aggregate of improbable angles and broken lines, like a crystal which has been damaged in the slow process of accretion. Generations had moulded it and the structure had in its slighter degree the inconsequence of a great public building which has grown through centuries unoppressed by the historical sense.

A wanderer approaching Rust Hall in the darkness – warily perhaps and by no other light than that coming from curtained windows – might be a good deal troubled by this fragmentary character in its architecture. The terrace which stretched augustly before the Georgian façade, though it might reasonably be expected either to curve round the house or to end in a leisured flight of steps, terminated precipitously above a small Dutch garden – the legacy of an Eliot who had supported Revolution – and threatened the prowling stranger with the novelty of immersion in a miniature canal. Such a furtive visitor, distinguishing as a likely approach to the house the darkness between two lines of ghostly elms, would be treading an avenue which led only to a doorway long since vanished, and down part of the length of which a fishpond – a project ill-conceived – had in its turn disappeared, leaving only certain pits and trenches ungrateful to the surprised foot. The marauder bent, it might be, on jest or burglary or more sinister design would be at an equal hazard if he once gained the interior of the house. At a dozen points where the centuries clashed the corridors would abruptly contact, so that to hug

the wall cautiously in the dark was to run one's nose hard upon wainscoting or plaster; at a score of others the floor level altered, threatening an abrupt descent down unseen steps from stone to wood or wood to stone. And the topography of Rust was all its own. One could not, certainly, wander endlessly in it – it was scarcely big enough for that – but one could very readily get lost. For the sort of misadventure which befell Mr Pickwick in the Great White Horse at Ipswich Rust Hall was just the place.

It was convenient, too, for the conduct of any proceedings designed to remain obstinately mysterious. A treasure hunt, hide and seek, or one of those livelier games in which the company progressively accumulates in one recess or cupboard: for the prosecution of any of these in its ideality Rust was precisely framed. Rooms unexpectedly intercommunicated, passages branched and united again, loft ladders and a brace of spiral staircases offered unlooked-for opportunities for reversal and surprise. In the course of years Mr Eliot's parties had gained a tolerable knowledge of all this, and there were several games expressly designed for the house – elaborate wandering-about affairs in which only the servants' hall and butler's pantry were out of bounds. But if it was a good house for playing at mysteries and bewilderments, it was equally a bad one in which to contemplate confronting the real thing. If funny-business were loosed in Rust funny-business would start with a pull.

Rust lay in darkness streaked by a major and a minor constellation of light; Mr Eliot's guests digesting and Mr Eliot's servants washing up. Dr Chown's observer, if – as is unthinkable – he had been eccentric enough to perch in an elm and

contemplate this traditional disposition of things, would have found no change on which to speculate until close on half past ten. At that hour, hard by the lesser and lower constellation, there sprang up in an independent light. Armed with nice knowledge in such things, the observer would know that the silver had been disposed of and that Mr Eliot's butler had retired to his sanctum. Mr Eliot, the observer might have reflected, had held ghostly communings with innumerable butlers, all of whom were wont to prowl their employers' homes at midnight, bearing decanters of whisky which rattled and even crashed to the ground as their bearer stumbled upon sprawled or huddled forms in the library. But Mr Eliot's fleshly butler, because he arranged matters at Rust on some principle established by a grandfather who had been in service with a marquis, was seldom out of his bed at eleven o'clock; the hour before that he liked to spend over some decent substitute for the *Morning Post*: and the only corpse he had discovered in his life was that of his aunt, Thomasina, who had fallen into a chalk-pit when sadly in liquor – an indulgence which had overtaken her when disappointed of a situation as head dairymaid in middle life.

Dr Chown's observer, had he been as omniscient as Dr Chown, might have beguiled himself with such trivial reflections while awaiting further developments. These came scantily. Now and then a light flashed on in the bedroom floors; once a short line of uncurtained lights briefly illuminated a billiard-table, as if someone had meditated a game and thought better of it or been dissuaded. Then at eleven o'clock there was a dramatic development: Rust, as once earlier that evening, disappeared into total darkness. Or

almost total darkness, for from the portico and from the servants' quarters came gleams which told that this time there was no complete failure of electric power. The darkness endured for only half a minute; beams, flickering and moving, appeared in the area where the main constellation of light had been; these presently radiated uncertainly and waveringly outward, as if from some central hive a little host of fireflies was spreading in random exploration about the house. This phenomenon lasted some five minutes, at the end of which time the fireflies – apparently with some attempt at synchronization – extinguished their wandering fires. A single light was left; this, stationary for a moment, began a solitary exploration which endured perhaps five minutes more; it was then joined by a second light and the two, dancing on together, presently discovered a third. The process continued *accelerando*; finally a little army of lights marched back to the spot from which they had first spread; a minute later they had disappeared in the normal illumination of Rust.

Appleby remembered with some amusement how earlier in the evening he had announced his possession of an electric torch. The living-room was now littered with torches; perhaps two dozen all told had been used in the game. He wondered idly whether they were supplied like the hot water bottles, or whether guests had to bring their own – a doubt presently solved by Rupert Eliot, who appeared with a large bag and industriously stowed them all away. It had been a good game in itself, and all the better because there had been distinguishable a certain element of bravado in the entering on it. Nerves were still not normal at Rust; indeed, the tension could be felt as increasing again – perhaps in proportion to

a returning fullness of consciousness in Mr Eliot. The plunge into darkness before the players hurried off with their torches to conceal themselves about the house could hardly have failed to bring back to his mind that earlier plunge into darkness before dinner: so obvious was this that Appleby tried to remember who had first suggested the game. But at this he failed; it was a game familiar to most of the party from previous years, and the impulse to it had seemed to start up from nowhere. Everyone was back now in the living-room, breathless, excited, some a little dusty or crumpled, some obscurely arch, some palpably recovering from the scare, each one perhaps in some degree relieved. There was a pause – a chattering pause but still a pause – and Appleby, removing a cobweb from his hair, sat back to think.

That first plunge into darkness: there was an oddity about it which, rightly probed, might give a key to whatever was going forward. He had looked at the fuse – plainly burnt out – and had assured Mr Eliot that the thing bore the appearance of mere accident. And to this Mr Eliot had reacted in what seemed quite the wrong way. He had been fearful of malice – nevertheless Appleby's assurance had been shock sufficient to throw him into a momentary faint. This, just because it didn't make sense, must be potentially informative.

Appleby had given no guarantee of accident; he had spoken simply of appearance. And such an appearance could have been engineered easily enough; the mere transposition of a sound and burnt-out fuse would have sufficed. What had upset Mr Eliot, then, was the announcement of *apparent* absence of malice. He believed, that

was to say, that the lights had been tampered with and he was upset on learning that this tampering had been accompanied by a simple trick which gave to the affair a colouring of accident. And not only upset, thought Appleby, but bowled over as by an authentic minor brainstorm. Of this there was surely only one adequate explanation. The elementary piece of hocus-pocus with the fuses must be something which Mr Eliot thought of as among the undelivered fruits of his own mind. 'Things planned for the Spider but never actually put on paper': the phrase had occurred in Patricia's letter and was the fantastic key, perhaps, to that otherwise inexplicably topsy-turvy reaction of Mr Eliot's before the switchboards. He had seen his creation stirring indeed.

This interpretation, though strange enough, did fit the facts. It even illuminated Mr Eliot's first remark about the failure of the lights; that the incident had reminded him of something odd. If one accepted it, then, in what context must it be placed? Of this fantasy of the Spider creeping from the books just what, so far, were the constituent facts?

There had been a series of broadly conceived practical jokes, ranging from an actual burglary and the recovery of burgled goods by a species of burlesque detection to the contrivance of eerie acoustical effects at Rust. These activities had been roughly related to the character called the Spider in Mr Eliot's romances; in the main, moreover, they associated themselves with that earlier phase of the creature's fictional existence in which he had figured as a disturber of the peace. There had been, too, the rather more curious and uncertain business of the

manuscripts, Mr Eliot averring that these – particularly that of a novel called *Murder at Midnight* – had undergone certain changes beyond his control. These changes might be described as pejorative; they represented the Spider feeling the tug of his criminal past and wavering in his recent adherence to the cause of virtue. This matter of the manuscripts was still obscure, but not so obscure as the situation which seemed to be reflected in the incident of the lights. Here Mr Eliot's vaguest and most startling suggestion came in. The being – man or shade – responsible for the manifestations was endowed with some species of clairvoyance; had the freedom of notions which Mr Eliot believed never to have passed the portals of his own brain. The trick with the fuses was in itself commonplace and unconvincing, but Mr Eliot was said to believe that there had been other, and startling, manifestations of this familiarity with his undiscovered thoughts. For the purpose of discovering who or what was at work this dubious territory was the most important of all, and the first step must be to form plans for exploring it. Unfortunately it was by its nature largely a matter of exploring Mr Eliot's mind, and for this Appleby scarcely had licence. He had come down justifiably enough in response to Belinda Eliot's legitimate anxieties. But he could hardly thrust himself upon whatever troubled counsels were taking place in Mr Eliot's mind. He could only hope that Mr Eliot would presently invite him into his confidence, or – as seemed not unlikely – that the whole matter would be further illuminated by fresh incidents.

One further line of thought, however, was open. Had the incidents such as they were any

discernible coherence and direction – anything analysable in terms of motive?

They were highly embarrassing to Mr Eliot and his children. Appleby doubted whether at the moment it would be useful to speculate beyond that first plain fact. Perhaps they were embarrassing also to Sir Rupert Eliot and Sir Archibald Eliot and any other Eliots which this capacious household might prove to contain. But Mr Eliot and Timmy and Belinda – Appleby judged on his present information – were peculiarly sufferers. The father had eminently the sort of sensitive and fanciful mind which could be readily played upon by hocus-pocus – in addition to which it appeared that his relations with the common ink-and-paper Spider had been verging on discomfort for some years. And the children appeared sensitive too: Belinda serious and fastidious; Timmy in a stage of puppyhood capable of feeling that Spiders were not quite the thing. The essence of the situation seemed to be a baiting of the Eliots: a baiting now boisterous and now subtle... The word subtle pulled him up. It reminded him that the trend of his thought scarcely took account of the disturbing notion formed by Patricia.

Appleby had got so far in his speculations when he became aware that he was behaving eccentrically. The majority of Mr Eliot's guests were not in musing mood, and anyone sitting in the midst of them in a brown study was liable to be regarded much as one who should cut capers at a funeral. The fat lady, who had proved to be the authoress of a number of overwhelming books pitched to the key of *Wuthering Heights*, was a ringleader in jollity; according to Wedge it was only thus that she contrived to support life

amid the thronging starkness of her creations. That morning – again according to Wedge – she had spent in evolving a description of her latest heroine's hanging a litter of puppies in a barn; it was the heroine's third birthday; there were four puppies; and the incident was going to extend to five thousand words. From this tremendous undertaking the fat lady was now in natural and healthy reaction, and she was urging on her fellow guests in all sorts of fun; she had just arranged a sort of charade – it had been copiously photographed by a professional person who had mysteriously appeared for the purpose – and now she was looking round with the eye of a general about to order some fresh disposition of a battlefield. Her eye fell on the reflective Appleby. The fat lady said, 'You'll do.'

Appleby assumed the air of eager and amused acquiescence proper to such occasion. A voice said, 'But he must have a partner; it's always played that way.' Other voices, all abundantly interested, agreed. Appleby, applying a little analytical method in a new sphere, concluded that this was to be another of those games in which people hid in the dark. He had got so far when the fat lady extended a pink and proprietary paw. 'John and I', said the fat lady – there were no Christian names of which she was not swiftly the master – 'will hide together.'

Appleby, who had not infrequently shared impenetrable darkness with very desperate persons indeed, thought of the puppies and was positively alarmed. He was rescued by Belinda. 'Mr Appleby', she said lightly but decisively, 'is the newest visitor and is going to hide with me.' Before anyone could question the logic of this she had swept him from the room.

'We are in a very strong position,' Belinda said gravely as they hurried along a corridor. 'I know Rust better than anyone except perhaps Timmy, and Timmy thinks it rather beneath his dignity to play this sort of thing well. He hides where he's sure to be caught first and then he retires to the library and drinks whisky – which he detests – and agrees with Rupert about its being a damned bohemian crowd.'

'And you?' Appleby was interested in Belinda.

'I'm glad' – Belinda's answer was discreetly oblique – 'you haven't had to hide with that fat Miss Cavey. But I don't think one should be impatient with a party of this kind. Most of them, of course, are of no importance. But one never knows. In twenty undistinguished writing folk there may always be lurking one original literary mind. How exciting to stumble upon a Blake or a Lawrence.'

A very serious young lady indeed, thought Appleby. In fact a little too serious to be true – and he glanced at Belinda warily, suspicious of mockery. But she was looking in a businesslike way about the upper corridor to which they had attained, as if one precise half of her mind were being given to the prosecution of the game and the other to the discussion on hand. He contented himself with the suspicion that there were several Belindas – as there were almost certainly several Mr Eliots – and that one of them rode a high literary horse indeed. It was pleasant to reflect on this Belinda suffering a score of Mr Wedge's goats on the problematical chance of their sheltering one unrecognized sheep.

'Timmy', pursued Belinda, 'is rather intolerant.'

'Ah,' said Appleby.

'Of course, he's very young, and he tends to pick up those gun-room, man-of-the-world attitudes from Rupert. He makes fun of the whole thing, but he really believes that it is a disgraceful invasion of the decent calm of Rust. Timmy is a little country-gentleman-to-be; and that sort has always talked of damned bohemian crowds.' She considered carefully. 'I don't mean that Timmy isn't all right. As it happens, I like him very much.'

This was no doubt what Mrs Moule distinguished as the modern tincture in Belinda's mind; in Mrs Moule's day brotherly and sisterly love was obligatory, like family prayers. 'Yes,' Appleby agreed gravely; 'he seems all right. But his tutor – Winter, isn't it? – appears to think of him not so much as a country-gentleman-to-be as a person of literary inventiveness that might-have-been. By the way, is this another game played in the dark?'

'Not exactly. At least we have to hide somewhere in the dark, but the body of the house remains lit up. We'll leave the light on in this corridor. And here is the place I'm thinking of.'

They were in the oldest part of the house and Belinda had stopped before an oak-panelled wall. She pressed on a piece of carving, gave a vigorous sideways shove, and a whole panel slid creakingly back to reveal a dusty cavity of uncertain dimensions.

'Good lord,' said Appleby; 'how very much to the taste–' He was going to add, 'of the Spider.' But remembering the severity of Belinda's mood he said vaguely instead, 'of the occasion.'

'There's another one downstairs, and possibly one or two more that we don't know about.' She glanced appraisingly at Appleby's dimensions. 'We'll fit nicely.'

Appleby peered in without enthusiasm. The priest-hole or whatever it was looked uncommonly grubby. 'Don't you think', he said, 'that it will rather – well, stain your new brocade?' He looked at her trailing party frock.

If anything, Belinda appeared pleased to be reminded of her namesake in Pope. 'My dear John – may I call you that? – housemaids nowadays simply will not dust secret passages as they ought. You may remark that from the ceiling's beams spiders have spun their webs for many a year.' Chanting this obscure blank verse she glanced at him with what he was now assured was mockery. 'In you go. Pretend you're hiding under the platform at a political meeting.'

Protesting indignantly that activities of the sort were not his policemanly line, Appleby allowed himself to be thrust inside. With some heaving and banging Belinda contrived to close the panel from within. Save for a single streak of light which came through a crack from the corridor they were in complete darkness. Appleby, who had been stooping, straightened himself and bumped his head. 'Damn,' said Belinda, sympathetically doing his swearing for him, 'I ought to have told you about that. But it's not cold and there are a couple of three-legged stools. We really shan't do badly. If we don't talk we can't possibly be found.' She paused and fumbled for the stools; in the restricted space they were not hard to find. They sat down side by side. 'But I think we'll talk all the same.' Her voice from the darkness, though subdued to

address an ear some four inches off, was crisp and businesslike again.

'It seems a good opportunity', Appleby agreed solemnly, 'for secluded conversation. More than commonly what is called *tête-à-tête*.'

'You pick up habits very quickly, John. You've already taken to literary tags, and now you're talking like Gerald Winter.'

'Gerald Winter. What's he doing here?'

'He's Timmy's contribution to an elucidation of the mystery – or rather part of it. The other part is Herbert Chown. And you are Patricia's and mine. We're backing you.'

'Thank you. Are there any other contributions, do you happen to know? For instance, does your father himself take any active steps?'

There was a moment's silence. 'I suppose', said Belinda inconsequently, 'that Eliots have played romantic make-believes in these hiding-holes for generations. Timmy and I did.' She turned to this question. 'He doesn't take any steps now. When Mrs Birdwire was burgled daddy was really angry and made a fuss and we had a lot of awful policemen–' Belinda checked herself. 'Local policemen, of course,' she amended.

'Belinda, all policemen are exactly the same at heart. I warn you of that at the beginning.'

'We had policemen and no end of a fuss. But then daddy grew shy about it. It was so awkward – the thing being all mixed up with his stories. And since the business of the manuscripts and the noises he's been inclined to regard it as a species of visitation. Sometimes, as you've gathered, he contrives to persuade himself that it's a subject for comfortable philosophical chat.

But on the whole I believe him to be bewildered and increasingly scared.'

There was a longer silence. Appleby listened for any sound of an approaching hunt outside; just what was the point of this particular game he had not enquired. The whole house seemed to have fallen quiet; he had leisure to reflect on the curious site which the competent young person sitting in the darkness beside him had chosen for their conference.

'Of course,' said Belinda – and her voice was almost self-consciously practical – 'it mayn't be a bad thing.'

'That your father should be bewildered and scared?' Appleby was startled; this was a degree of modernity for which he himself was unprepared.

'No; not exactly that. Simply that it should be rather bothersome for a bit. It might give him resolution to defy all these interested folk and snap out of the whole thing. I mean that he might feel that the best course was to kill off the Spider and forget about him. I was saying this afternoon that daddy would be far happier if he could swap Spiders for pigs.'

'You feel strongly that the Spider industry should be liquidated?'

'Of course I do. We all do. If the Spider doesn't die a decent death soon he'll linger on indefinitely and – and expire a driveller and a show.'

Appleby was getting used to fragmentary bombardments of eighteenth-century verse. But it was very odd that Mr Eliot's harmlessly entertaining creation should have so got under the skin of Mr Eliot's household. 'It seems to me,

Belinda Eliot,' he said, 'that you and your brother and perhaps the lot of you have spiders in the bonnet. These sustained jokes may have got on your father's nerves particularly, but they've got on yours too.'

'I'm no doubt fussed.' Appleby could imagine Belinda's severely intellectual little head allowing itself a petulant toss in the darkness. 'And of course I don't really a bit mind daddy going on to make his century if he's set on it. Still' – he could imagine a frankly wrinkled nose – 'it's very tiresome.'

'And particularly worries your brother. Of course, as you say, he's very young.'

Belinda was reduced to a meditative pause. Appleby glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. 'Ten to twelve,' he said.

Silence prolonged itself. Appleby, knowing nothing of the history of Rust Hall, speculated on silences that might have been maintained in this lurking-place in the past. There rose up before his mind – vividly because of the darkness – a picture which had hung in his bedroom as a child. *When did you last see your father?* He wondered if that celebrated tableau of investigation had first set his infant mind in the direction of its present activities. Cavalier Eliots, perhaps, had ensconced themselves in this retreat during just such Roundhead visitations as that old picture illustrated. Or the family may have held to the old religion and sheltered here in the musty darkness some hardy Jesuit from Reims or Douai. For a moment Appleby almost believed that he heard the rustle of priestly skirts beside him; then a little waft of perfume – illusive as from the toilet of the first Belinda – told him that he was wool-gathering in a most unprofessional way.

Wondering just how late were the hours the party kept, he returned to business.

'What we are faced with so far is a mild persecution of the Eliot: no more than that. Perhaps the most useful thing we can do is to hunt about for likely motives. Why should such a thing be sufficiently attractive to drive a joker to a good deal of trouble – to say nothing of into real physical danger? If one can think of motives one may then be able to find people likely to be impelled by them. But of course your knowledge of the family situation and so on may enable you to take a short cut and hit on a likely person straight away.'

A rustle told that Belinda had again shifted in the darkness. 'We're a curious household,' she said circumspectly. 'And then again daddy's in a curious position. I expect you will have learnt already that it generates envies and enmities which he probably never thinks of.'

'I'm picking up impressions, as you say. And I have a notion, too, that the thing may be infectious. By the way, has it had any publicity? It occurs to me that these queer tricks on the author of the Spider stories must be what is called news.'

'It's had hardly any publicity so far. The Birdwire business was pretty well smothered – I don't quite know how.'

'I see. There's something very picturesque in the notion of a popular writer's chief character coming mysteriously alive on him and following him round with a clarinet. If it did get publicity there would be plenty of people to say that it was a smart stunt.'

Belinda's stool scraped sharply on the floor. 'John,' she said, 'you have an abominably lucid mind. That particular horror hadn't occurred to me.'

'Of course it mightn't be a bad thing. That was your phrase, wasn't it? From what I've seen of your father I should imagine that nothing would be more likely to make him walk out for good. Which is what you and Timmy appear to want.'

'At least a scandal of that sort wouldn't be good for Timmy's idiotic diplomacy.'

'I don't know about that. You're rather confounding the diplomatic, perhaps, with a fussy and exclusive club. And I gather you don't approve of it anyway. Long-lived Spiders on the one hand and infant ambassadors on the other: they're both tiresome?'

The stool scraped again. 'I don't know what you're getting at. There – that's just what the suspects say in the books. But I suppose you go round everyone like this?'

'I don't get everyone into a nice, quiet, dark, secret chamber. But – roughly – yes. I told you about policemen. And now let's talk about publisher Wedge.'

'Let's, for the lord's sake... I knew we'd never be found in here... Of Wedge, what?'

'These parties are his idea?'

'Yes.'

'And they're manipulated into a mild form of publicity?'

'Oh, yes. It's very tire – It's mildly annoying.'

'Suppose this funny-business piled up a bit more and were splashed in the national press.'

Would that be good for Wedge and the books?’

‘Oh, dear! John, this is this most depressing. You’re not nearly so cogent when aiming at Wedge as when circling deftly round my poor father’s children. Daddy has to be kept in the public eye, but I don’t think Wedge would in the least relish a sensation. The result would be much too problematical. With somebody just less than moderately successful it might be worth taking a chance on, but not with a smooth-sailing best-seller. And you must consider the effect of the business on daddy. Is it likely that Wedge would risk driving one of his most valuable assets half crazy? And Wedge, though fond of playing the buffoon at times, is tremendously astute. He’s been far more the making of Spider, really, than daddy has. These are facts. And I’m strongly of the opinion that he is honest as well. In fact, John Appleby, think again.’

‘Certainly. Let’s take–’

Belinda stood up – and bumped her head. ‘Damn,’ said Appleby.

‘Thank you. I was going to listen. I’m not sure I didn’t hear that idiotic secretary’s stick. Don’t you think this game is taking an awfully long time?’

‘Having no idea of what the game is I can’t form an opinion. Let’s go back to where we started.’

‘All right.’ Belinda began fumbling with the panel.

‘I didn’t mean that. With this discussion.’

Belinda sighed. ‘Patricia has introduced a fiend to Rust. But carry on.’

'Let us hope' – Appleby spoke soberly – 'that nobody has introduced a fiend to Rust – or will introduce one anywhere else.'

'I suppose that's the authentic cryptic note. Just what do you mean?'

'There's nothing cryptic about it. So far this persecution, which appears curiously haphazard, has confined itself to Rust. Is it going to confine itself to Rust and your father in the future, or is it going to propagate itself elsewhere and to other Eliots? I take it you haven't had any trouble at Shoon Abbey?'

'Not a spot.'

'It would be a good place for trouble,' said Appleby with mild professional glee.

Midnight was distant only a few minutes, and by this time boredom – were boredom possible to a scientific abstraction – would have overtaken Dr Chown's observer in his elm tree. There had sprung up a faint, cold wind. It sighed through the bare branches with just power enough to brush the last pendent rain-drops from the twigs; they fell to earth with a sound which sharpened itself in the silence to the semblance of distant pattering feet. Nothing else stirred. The lights from the living-room glowed steadily and reassuringly behind their curtains; others higher up marked windows giving on corridors. The house was to be imagined as one large well of light from which winding tunnels of light radiated out through darkness; all other illumination had been extinguished by the exigencies of what was going on within. Once, twice a fluttering shadow passed across one of the dimly glowing upper windows, as if a flake of incumbent night had

detached itself and drifted to the dark below – bat or owl brushing, circling Rust. An owl hooted. Then across the farthest living-room window a larger shadow moved with superior deliberation; for a moment light shone naked, as if a curtain had been withdrawn. Once more the shadow moved, swift and assured. And after that, nothing; the episode, if episode it were, seemed closed. In the upper branches the wind sighed louder and the tree stirred uneasily, as if a storm were coming.

In the priest-hole the conversation had drifted. 'There's going to be a grand visit to the Abbey,' Belinda was saying. 'I'm going to smuggle you in. You don't know Jasper?'

'No.' Appleby chuckled. 'One day I hope to arrest him.'

'Arrest Jasper!'

'When one is young' – Appleby's tone was provocatively fatherly – 'one may want to liquidate Spiders. When one gets on one thinks it wouldn't be a bad idea to liquidate the Shoons.'

'But, John, he's a nice old party in his queer way. And I don't believe people as wealthy as he is are ever arrested.'

Appleby sighed. 'Well, not often. But one day we may get him. He'll run a gun or two to the wrong people – say on the fringes of British India – and somebody will lose patience and the important people will be tipped to get quietly off his boards and we may be told to sail in. It's an improbable fantasy, but I like it. I don't suppose you've burrowed much into the economic foundations of Shoon Abbey?'

'I know' – Belinda was petulant again – 'that Jasper thinks me worth eight pounds a week.'

'Yes. Patricia was awfully cheered when you joined her there. He began to pay her that too.'

There was a pause: it represented Belinda thinking. 'But, John, surely she got that before? Why, Patricia took a better degree than I did.'

'Belinda Eliot, you are a child of privilege – didn't you know? Friend Shoon is a very wealthy man, and he felt that he couldn't give the daughter of another very tolerably wealthy man less. The feeling may be called plutocratic solidarity. But being, I gather, graceful in little matters, he pushed up Patricia to the same screw. She was shoutingly pleased and has begun doing her shopping in different streets.'

'I do think this interminable game–' Belinda stopped and appeared to think better of evasion. 'And do all policemen specialize in these chastening asides? Consider me as feeling small. And tell me more about poor Jasper.'

'There's not much to tell. He's flourishing at the moment, as you may guess from the amount of money you're given to play with in the sale-rooms. You see, he doesn't have to play the old dangerous game of arming rebels. He arms rightful governments.'

'Rightful governments?'

'The people who would be governing if other people hadn't been wrongfully elected to the job. On the strength of that he can buy any number of Egyptian papyri and Attic pots.'

'I think this conference has been most depressing all round. Still, you ought to enjoy meeting the villain, to say nothing of seeing the

Abbey.' Belinda got cautiously up. 'Look here, let's get out. We haven't been found and the game must be over long ago.'

'Yes', said Appleby. 'Nothing seems to have happened since-' He stopped abruptly. 'Belinda, didn't you say that for this game the corridor lights remained on?'

'They all remain on. Only lights in rooms aren't allowed.'

'There was a gleam of light from the corridor here through a crack. I've just noticed it's gone.' He laid a hand on Belinda's arm. 'Listen.'

Directly above their heads - in their confined darkness at once as immediate and as bafflingly remote as the signal of a diver to men trapped in a submarine - passed the melodramatic, the absurd, the sinister sound of the blind secretary's stick.

Within and without, Rust Hall lay in darkness. And this time John Appleby had no electric torch to hand. Nobody had a torch; the score or so which had flitted about the house shortly before had been stowed neatly away in a bag by Sir Rupert Eliot. Rust was peculiarly ill-equipped to deal with a second invasion of night.

Appleby and Belinda tugged back the secret panel between them; as they did so a confused murmuring reached them from above, about, below. It rose, as they stumbled out, to shouts and cries. Once more, Mr Eliot's party was having a bad time.

'This,' said Belinda, 'is monotonous.' She spoke quickly, as if making a timely grab at her own reactions. 'I can even hear Miss Cavey taking up her role of leading the pack.' Miss Cavey's yell, though somewhat muted by distance, was indeed unmistakable.

Appleby took Belinda's arm and they groped along the corridor. 'I hope', he said, 'that the eyes of those four puppies are squinnying at her in the dark... It's the deplorable truth that I have a match-box with only one match; we'll save it for emergencies. You're guide. I suppose you didn't contrive this yourself with a master-switch hidden in our cubby-hole and a gramophone for the tap-tap?... Lord, what a row.'

They had come to the head of the main staircase; a petty chaos echoed up the well. Here

and there a match spurted and went out – extinguished by a chill night wind which had begun to blow inexplicably about the house. ‘Try that very persuasive voice,’ said Belinda.

Even as he filled his lungs to obey, Appleby was forestalled. From a central position below somebody called out, ‘Stop it!’ The voice was not persuasive; it was, however, so formidably angry that nearly everybody stopped.

‘Timmy’s Toplady,’ said Belinda. ‘Another little diplomat. And a creature not without surprises.’

‘And now,’ said the voice of Toplady, ‘the windows. A lot are open. Will some people – just two or three – try to find them and shut them?’ The voice paused, waiting for evidences of obedience; when it continued it had abandoned its emergency *staccato*. ‘It will be reasonable to suppose,’ it pursued in tones which were a soothing epitome of reasonableness, ‘that the candles, of which there were a great many, may have been left on the dinner-table till morning. It is often done.’ Toplady’s anxiety, echoing out of the darkness, to avoid any suggestion of inadequacy in the domestic economy of Rust was eminently impressive and the party was rendered quite dumb. ‘I’m going to find them. And then perhaps the gentleman who helped us before – I’m afraid I must confess to having forgotten his name – will make another inspection of the fuses.’

Leaning over the top of the staircase Appleby chuckled anew. ‘I’m whacked,’ he murmured. ‘Toplady, did you say? The ruling caste, I suppose. Just so do Topladys take charge beneath palm and pine. Down we go and I’ll try to perform my little mechanic task.’ His voice grew serious and his hand tightened momentarily

on Belinda's before letting it go. 'It is my opinion' – the words came with an authority of their own – 'that nothing very alarming has happened.'

'Good,' said Belinda – and asked no questions. They hurried down.

'Because' – Appleby was briskly communicative – 'something is being worked up to. A bastard artistic process. And we haven't reached the climax yet.'

Like celebrants at a smartly-costumed witches' sabbath a semi-circle of Mr Eliot's guests held up silver candlesticks. Windows had been closed and the draught substantially controlled, but eddying gusts still caught the candles so that they smoked and flared uncertainly, giving the appearance of a lively sequence of emotion to faces now resolved to be as cool and impassive as might be. Only Wedge, who had secured a branching candelabra and was standing in a pose most consciously hieratic, and Peter Holme, who was irresistibly impelled to gestures suitable to the taper scene in *Julius Caesar*, were without an apparent anxiety to be eminently correct. Toplady and Chown were standing one on each side of Mr Eliot, who was responding with conscientious courtesy to two conflicting sedative techniques.

'It's not,' said Appleby, deciding after a moment's reflection on a general dissemination of intelligence, 'the fuses this time. It's the main switch – the little lever affair one throws out or presses home. Somebody has wrenched it away bodily, with a good deal of strength and at some risk. At the moment I'm afraid I see no substitute.' There was a pause, the harassed party standing woefully round. 'Wait a minute, though. I want a large india-rubber and every available packet or tin of cigarettes. Not

cigarette-cases: tins or packets.' The party stirred, chattered; there was a little fuss of coming and going; the required articles were handed up as to an illusionist on a stage. 'Motorists in particular', Appleby said instructively, 'should carry abundant tinfoil. It works' – abruptly Rust was deluged in light – 'wonders.' He slid to the floor.

For the second time in a brief space Hugo Toplady rose to an occasion. 'How cheering', he said commandingly, 'that we can all see to go to bed.'

Rather like the chorus of a musical comedy, being huddled off stage so that the principals can get on with the romantic business of the piece, the majority of the party went hastily through the business of breaking up for the night. Only Miss Cavey was chary of departing. Perhaps her spirits were more volatile than those of the rest; perhaps she was reluctant to be left alone in bed in the dark, meditating her pendent puppies and listening for the uncanny musical meditations of the Spider. The former appeared to be the truth, for she enquired with some anxiety whether it was Friday or Saturday which had just elapsed, and on being assured that it was Friday remarked that it was Saturday night, after all, that was the grand night of the party. Mr Eliot was left surrounded by his relations and a sort of inner-circle of semi-confidants. But no one seemed very certain of what course the play ought now to follow, or just what part he or she might judiciously take. Somebody had fetched drinks from the library – to which several of the departed guests had made a detour to fortify themselves against the night – and the little group sat about the hall, some on the staircase

and some on scattered chairs, giving every evidence of contemplating a thoroughly uncertain situation. Hugo Toplady, having dispersed the herd, seemed to feel that his job was done. It was Appleby who broke silence, taking the horns of the first bull that came to hand. 'There is no doubt of its being deliberate this time. And I shall be surprised if nothing is involved beyond a second cutting off of the lights. What interests me is the curious moment chosen for the joke.'

'I should have thought' – Gerald Winter spoke from a perch on the staircase above the others – 'that it was capital, if obvious, moment: everybody hidden away for what was going to be – I have no doubt – a very amusing game.' Winter contrived to look at once bored and perturbed.

'The curious point', said Appleby – and he might have been charged with insinuating a faintly irritating patience into his voice – 'is not that we were all hiding, but that we were all hiding *in pairs*.' Everybody – except Mr Eliot, who was sitting quite still on the lowest tread of the staircase – stirred uneasily and Appleby felt that, for good or ill, he had established himself as an investigator. He pressed on. 'It would be interesting to know who was hiding with whom, and who, it may be, wasn't hiding at all.'

'A tally of who was hiding with whom?' Timmy, sipping whisky distastefully in a corner, broke in. 'You know, that might be a bit embarrassing.' His tone was appreciative, as if he thought this possibility all to the good. 'The Cavey wanted Appleby. But whom did she get?'

Mr Eliot looked up. 'Miss Cavey and I', he said, 'hid ourselves in a linen-cupboard on the first floor.' He spoke with effort, as if roused only by

the conventional need of stopping Timmy making fun of an absent guest. 'When I come to think of it, we seemed to be there an uncommonly long time. Miss Cavey told me a great deal about her new book, only' – Mr Eliot frowned in perplexity – 'it's a very odd thing' – the frown vanished and he lit up in appreciation of a humorous aspect of what he was going to say – 'I can remember nothing at all about it.' He smiled in momentary happiness at Timmy, drawn into the fun he had proposed to check. And then again he frowned. 'There is something very odd about my memory tonight.'

Everyone was embarrassed. 'It was', said Belinda suddenly, 'a very long game. And I don't believe anybody was found at all. There's always a racket when people break cover, and John and I didn't hear a sound.'

'Anyway' – Timmy spoke impulsively – 'there's one person who wasn't paired. That's Archie. He was the hunter. And he'll know if he caught anybody.'

All eyes turned to Sir Archibald Eliot. This too was embarrassing, because Sir Archibald was evidently drunk. Appleby remembered that it was on this round little man that he had been deprived of information when Mrs Moule had been led from the dining-room. Once more Appleby took a moment to place him. He was the unsuccessful engineer; more curiously he was in some obscure way the victim of the sadistic trend in Mr Eliot which had been under discussion some hours before. If persecuted, he seemed to bear up well. He exuded comfortableness, and a placidity which was only emphasized by liquor. From under heavily drooping eyelids he looked amiably at Timmy now. But it was Mr Eliot who

spoke. 'The pontiff,' he said sharply; 'what can he tell us?'

So there it was. For one whose bridge had behaved so badly the nickname was scarcely kind. But it was sanctioned, perhaps, by affectionate family usage; certainly the glance which Archie transferred to Mr Eliot was as amiable as ever. 'Do I,' asked Archie in a voice thick and yet not displeasing, 'carry the moon in my pocket?'

Appleby sighed. The engineer too was literary.

'These blackouts', said Archie, as if gently complaining; 'they keep on happening. A case of put out the light, and then put out the light.' His eyes opened fully for a moment, as if he were astonished at his own felicity in quotation. 'A game's a game, my dear Richard. But even for the sake of a game was I to go stumbling about your rat-ridden stairs?' He reflected. 'Not', he amended seriously, 'that there really are rats at Rust. But in all that darkness could I really wander about catching people? Be reasonable, my dear chap.' Quite inoffensive, Archie hiccuped.

Mr Eliot appeared to be momentarily at a loss and it was Timmy who replied. 'So you didn't catch anybody? But the lights didn't go out, I'm quite sure, till a long time after you ought to have begun.'

It was so obvious that Archie could scarcely have been in a condition for effective hunting that the majority of the group turned upon Timmy eyes of mild reproof. Archie, however, was again reflecting. 'Drowsy syrups,' he said. 'That was it: drowsy syrups.' He looked vaguely about him, apparently expecting to find poppy and mandragora bestrewing the floor. Timmy, with the

ghost of an unkind significance, splashed a little more soda into his glass. It was all very unedifying and nearly everybody was unhappy.

'You mean, Sir Archibald' – a new voice had broken in – 'that you have been drugged?' This was Dr Chown.

Once more Mr Eliot roused himself, seemingly anxious to put an end to his kinsman's improbable plea. 'No, no, Chown. Because of the party Archie has been celebrating a little. I really think we ought – '

But Chown, paying no attention to his host, had briskly crossed the hall and thrust up one of Archie's eyelids with no more ceremony than if he had been a hospital outpatient or an inanimate object. 'He *is* drugged,' he said shortly. 'There can be no possible doubt of it.'

It was worse and worse. Patricia, who had lingered to companion Belinda, found herself reflecting that it would be far, far better if there were – as there presumably was not – a corpse in the library. A corpse justifies any amount of uncomfortableness; in the interest of a blood-hunt social decencies can cheerfully be abandoned. But the nearest thing to blood that had turned up at Rust so far was red water-colour paint. And the closest approximation to blood-lust that had come under observation was in Hugo Toplady when he had found that paint on his shaving-brush. There had been no crime – or no crime nearer than the grotesquerie of the Birdwire burglary. A burlesque burglary, a hazardous advertisement that Rust was Folly Hall, a bogus confession by Timmy, an absurd statement by this Archie Eliot which yet turned

out to be true, sundry fragments of funny-business, a certain wild apprehension of her own: they all abundantly deserved Belinda's strongest epithet of condemnation; they were tiresome, every one. Patricia, having got thus far, glanced across at her brother. And she saw that here at least was someone oblivious of either tiresomeness or awkwardness; at the moment oblivious of everything at Rust except its owner.

Openly or covertly, everybody was looking at Mr Eliot. Suddenly he had taken – undemonstratively but with deliberation – the centre of the stage; had taken it physically, standing in the middle of his hall with the little gathering grouped about him. 'I am sorry', he said, 'that so many people have gone to bed. Those of you who remain will believe me when I say that I really do feel extremely the need of apologizing. It has been uncomfortable – most uncomfortable – but it has at least shown me what I must do. I have been in great doubt; at least the thing is now clear.'

Mr Eliot paused. He was a man defeated; at the same time he was a man conscious that there had been lifted from him some burden of uncertainty. His attitude was that of one who has finally arrived at facts crushing in themselves, but facts in the light of which it is at long last possible to act.

'I am, as I say, ever so sorry. I am myself, of course, entirely responsible.'

The company stared at him, bewildered.

'Of course one has to beware of coincidence: I have been keenly aware of that all along.' Mr Eliot glanced about him for support, seemingly quite unconscious that his remarks were mysterious.

'But now I think that there can be no doubt of it. And this is the Birthday Party.'

Belinda spoke in a low, strained voice. The birthday party, daddy?'

'Yes, my dear but with capital letters. The Birthday Party. As we all know, it is a birthday party – *his* birthday party.' Mr Eliot paused again and the company instinctively drew a little closer, as if this cautious turn of phrase had made a little more real the fantastic supposition that the Spider was at large at Rust. 'It *is* a birthday party: that is point one. The lights went out: that is point two. So far there might be nothing but coincidence. But now Archie has been drugged. And that is conclusive. It is staggering; there was a period at which I was very much upset. But once faced – though I don't think it *ought* to be faced for *long* – the thing is intensely interesting.' Once more Mr Eliot looked round the circle of troubled faces. 'I see that you are all naturally curious. There are, then, these points which assure me that this is the Birthday Party. And now let me tell you the fourth; let me' – Mr Eliot was for the moment almost gay – 'prophecy!' His brow clouded suddenly. 'Only my memory is really *not* good. I forget the details. Perhaps there never were any details. But of the fourth point I am convinced. It will be something about a picture.'

There was a baffled silence. It was broken by Appleby. 'Was there not', he asked quietly, 'a fifth point: Folly Hall?'

Mr Eliot shook his head decisively. 'No,' he said, 'no.' His tone was oddly matter-of-fact. 'You are thinking of something quite different. The Birthday Party you see, is ancient history, and – what is so very remarkable – history which never

achieved itself. I am sure you will agree with me about the interest of the whole matter. There is nothing in it repugnant to the speculative intelligence, and yet it is more uncanny to an unreflective mind than anything that could be imagined' – he looked cautiously round – 'by our excellent friend Mrs Moule.'

The minds congregated round Mr Eliot were presumably of the unreflective kind; the features which they governed were growing increasingly blank. But Mr Eliot seemed to have no suspicion that he was being other than lucid and convincing.

'I must confess myself to a pretty thorough-going rationalism. The vulgar supernatural has never held any attraction for me; I shall never believe in anything of the kind. But, as Winter and I agreed on the train this morning, this is a purely metaphysical matter.'

Mr Eliot paused and looked hopefully at Timmy's tutor; Timmy's tutor looked awkwardly back and appeared to feel that some utterance was necessary. 'Mr Eliot', he said, 'is inclined to believe that imaginative writing is, strictly, creative; that there grows out of it an autonomous world, as real as our own. It is not quite our reality, but a reality nevertheless. The idea' – he hesitated – 'is one of very respectable ancestry and antiquity. But Mr Eliot further believes that these realities, normally discrete, sometimes get muddled up – like telephone conversations when the wires get crossed in a storm.'

Mr Eliot nodded emphatically, plainly pleased with the simile with which Winter had adorned his theory. He was about to continue when Appleby interposed. 'So the Birthday Party is a former

imaginative creation which has somehow come to enact itself about us tonight? A story you once wrote?’

Everybody was quiet, variously feeling that this was a critical question. And Mr Eliot’s response was immediate. ‘Not at all!’ he cried. ‘It is just here that the really absorbing point comes in. I never did write that story. I only projected it.’

There would have been another and chilled silence but for Winter. Perhaps because he thought to mitigate the embarrassment of the moment, perhaps because this sort of verbal conjuring was irresistible to him. He raised a debater’s finger and rushed into speech. ‘Then I don’t think you can claim to have created or originated the story. It seems much more likely that the story is something existing independently elsewhere, and that your projecting it, as you call it, represented your mind coming into some groping contact with it. It looks to me like one of those tricks which we are coming to believe can be played us by time. Perhaps this, here and now, is *really* the Birthday Party, and when you thought of it as a story your mind was taking a brief dip into the future. Perhaps all imaginative creation is no more than that. Perhaps *all* your stories will come true one day.’

At this Mr Eliot, who had been standing dominating the hall, suddenly sat down and passed a hand across his brow. His chosen defence against the bewildering turn his world had taken was in what Belinda had called philosophic chat. But philosophic chat was not his real line. Winter’s practised turning of his idea inside-out, coupled maybe with the mere fancy of his thirty-seven romances lurking in a pregnant

future, appeared to have had the effect of bowling him over once more. 'At least', he said rather desperately, 'I see what I had better do... It *may* stop it.'

Chown, frowning disapprovingly – seemingly at Timmy's whisky but perhaps at the trend of things in general – and tapping a small table with an impatient finger, took advantage of the silence. 'This metaphysical talk', he said, 'no doubt has its charms. Unfortunately, it is both out of place and so much damned nonsense.'

'Hear, hear!' A new voice broke in; it was that of Rupert Eliot, roused to sympathy by a little mild swearing. 'Damned college nonsense. And all the time there is some low blackguard round the corner waiting to be laid by the heels.'

Appleby, who felt that the talk was liable to proceed with a positively Russian indefiniteness, sprang to his feet. 'I suggest that perhaps we are wasting time. It seems very likely that this second failure of the lighting has been accompanied by some further demonstration. Mr Eliot believes that a picture will prove to be involved, and Sir Rupert Eliot is concerned about a low blackguard. I suggest we have a look round. Perhaps the blackguard has made off with the picture. Let us suppose him to be either a connoisseur or an astute commercial man; that suggests a reassuring glance at the most valuable picture in the house. What would that be?'

The gathering in the hall breathed more freely, relieved at having scrambled down to the prosaic level of burglars and policemen. Belinda stood up. 'Far the most valuable picture is the El Greco in the library.'

'The El Greco!' When staying in a modest country house it is permissible to be mildly startled at the news that there is an El Greco round the corner.

'Daddy bought it last year from the man who discovered it. It's almost our secret. But it has been abundantly authenticated. And it's a big one.'

'A big one?' Appleby, who had envisaged a small head on a panel, was past astonishment. 'Well, I think we had better visit it.'

They trooped to the library – Mr Eliot, who still seemed able to feel that the possible theft of a valuable picture might be a purely metaphysical matter, leading the way composedly enough. The lights flicked on; the company performed a jostling manoeuvre round a bay of books; Mr Eliot sighed; everybody stopped dead. For seconds there was complete silence: an El Greco is doubly quieting when one has hurried excitedly up in the apprehension that it may not be there. And it was certainly big: a whole bevy of saints and fathers undulating upwards like flame. Appleby blessed Mr Eliot and his tribulations for having brought him in front of the thing; when he had finished doing so he became aware that everybody else had drifted away. Presumably they were making a tour of other valuable pictures in the house; Appleby had another look at the El Greco – good states of mind had just as well to be seized when they came – and followed at his leisure. Voices guided him to the living-room; they rose in exclamation as he entered.

It was the Renoir. Where it had hung the wall was a blank – or would have been blank had there not been splashed on it the black silhouette of an enormous spider.

The voice of Dr Chown rose above half-a-dozen surprised and indignant murmurs. 'Those telephones wires', he said dryly, 'appear to have got crossed to uncommonly good purpose. We are to suppose that the picture – to say nothing of a large and solid gilt frame – has been wafted away to the autonomous world of imaginative creation. Well, well, well.' He glanced at Mr Eliot and changed his tone. 'Come, Eliot; I for one won't say you are wrong. The first business of science is to admit our absolute human ignorance. And I doubt if we can do much more tonight. We want bed and sleep, and to talk it over in the morning.' Chown had become the competent physician, his tones confident and his mind on bromide.

Appleby stepped forward and touched the black paint. It was quite dry. Behind the picture this sprawling signature had been lurking for an indefinite period, awaiting its moment. A voice spoke in Appleby's ear – Timmy's carefully lowered. 'The Renoir was daddy's present to Belinda on her twenty-first. It's a bit thick.'

It was a bit thick, Appleby could see. It was, indeed, more than ingeniously wounding. Belinda, pale and determinedly practical, was holding her father's hand. Appleby looked curiously at Mr Eliot. It was, he felt, another critical moment. Chown had just beaten a precipitate retreat; had admitted, in effect, that the notions which Mr Eliot had been developing must be treated gently – must be respected as a protective fantasy built up by an overstrained mind. But in face of this calculated stroke of malice – the pitching of a crude and public creation against the symbol of a private relationship – Mr Eliot's only sane reaction must be resentment. On the morrow and

when the shock was over the matter would be different, but did Mr Eliot now and at this moment continue to talk desperately of philosophic interest he would indeed be far on the way to becoming a case for a psychiatrist.

For a strained moment Mr Eliot kept silence. When he spoke it was to say little. 'Belinda, I think we have had enough excitement for tonight and that Chown does well to counsel us to bed. I confess I am bewildered and cannot think usefully about what has happened. And' – Mr Eliot's expression held a sudden odd surprise – 'I am angry too.' He stopped, and his appearance changed again: it was as if he were unexpectedly confronted with a vista down a long dark corridor. 'There is something that I cannot quite remember...something altogether different from what I have been saying.' His glance went round the company – searching, it seemed, for a face. He shook his head, perplexed and dejected. Holding Belinda's hand he moved across the room, patted Timmy on a shoulder, murmured goodnights to the others, and was gone.

A diffused sigh – the long expiration of several breaths – hovered in the air. Evidently, there had been a theft. But, far more palpably, there had been outrage – and those who were left in the room were uneasily conscious of indefinable trespass. There was a general retreat – to bed or to decently private discussion; in a couple of minutes Appleby – tacitly left as the professional in charge – found himself alone in the contemplation of a purposive splash of black paint.

He studied the wall and the carpet beneath it; turned from that to an open window at the far

end of the room. His eye ran from window to wall and then, more slowly, back again; he checked his gaze halfway and strode behind a sofa. This procedure appeared to afford him enlightenment; he nodded absently, went on to the window, and passed through curtains which were stirring gently in the night breeze. The majority of the windows in this wall ran to floor level and opened outwards on the terrace; but this was a common sash window, now thrown wide open from the bottom. He peered out. It was quite dark. He climbed to the sill, dropped cautiously down, bent to the ground, and lit his solitary match. It went out. A voice from above said, 'I've collared one of the torches from that bag.'

'Hand it down.' Appleby knew that the voice was Gerald Winter's. 'And, if you don't mind, just sit still. I'm coming to have another look at that floor.'

'I hope I'm not thrusting myself on you?'

'Not at all.' Appleby's voice floated in from the darkness. 'You begin to interest me.'

'I'm flattered.'

'And so does nearly everybody else. One of you in this house has a remarkable and unengaging mind.'

Winter raised a troubled face from the contemplation of his empty glass and took another look at Appleby moving carefully about the room. 'For that matter,' he said, picking up the thread of their scanty conversation, 'you interest me. Gentlemen's embarrassments waited on in their own homes. It's most beguiling. They say you're a real detective-officer from Scotland Yard; is that true?'

'Quite true. My presence is mysterious. But then so is yours; I don't think you came down to meet Miss Cavey or play eight varieties of hide-and-seek?' Appleby, lying flat on his stomach on the carpet, cocked up at Winter a quick speculative eye.

'I came, as a matter of fact, to probe the mystery. But faced by professional competition' – Winter gestured at the other's prone form – 'I regress. I regress – like this tedious Spider – on my true role and simply talk. But I also like to listen.' He became quite serious and it was evident that he was really disturbed. 'Particularly to you.'

Appleby got up. 'I don't generally run a commentary as I go along, but I'll do my best. By the way, are you what that fellow Chown calls a disinterested mind? Is there anybody in the household that you love or hate? Your pupil, for instance?'

'Timmy? He's all right; I certainly don't hate him, nor love him either.' Winter shook a weary head. 'Too many Timmys have flowed under my bridges in the past twelve years, and I grow more and more bored with personal relationships, especially with the young. The young are touching and beautiful, but charity itself cannot call them intellectually exciting. I prefer the impersonality of Greek vases. You can put me down as a mind of the disengaged sort.' He stared frowningly into the ashes of a dead fire. 'But this rum business has got me all the same. I'm scared.'

It was an odd termination to a discursive speech. Appleby, preoccupied with a long low stool, looked briefly up. 'Scared? I'm coming to think we're all meant to be that.'

'You think that in all this there's an element of danger?'

'If nothing is lost except a Renoir – even an El Greco – I'll be pleased.'

Winter sprang to his feet. 'Look here–' He stopped and appeared to think better of what he was going to say. 'Are we sure it's not a simple theft with a few whimsicalities thrown in? After all, an exceedingly valuable painting has been pretty efficiently made off with.'

'You mean another Birdwire affair – and that the picture may turn up again?'

Winter shook his head emphatically. 'I wasn't thinking of that. The two affairs have only a superficial resemblance. As far as I can gather, the Birdwire affair was more amusing – in its broad fashion – than wounding. This is the other way round. My idea is that this may be a real theft, done for gain, but with a rather horrid malice thrown in.'

'I don't think it has been done for gain.' Appleby was staring once more at the black spider. 'I should be more cheerful if I did. The heart of the thing – so far, at least – appears to be an elaborate and sustained attack on Eliot; on Eliot's tranquillity, his sanity, his relations with his children, perhaps his fortune. Consider this incident – it is only that – of the picture. The public rooms were empty and the thief could have gone anywhere. The Renoir is valuable, but the El Greco far more so. The Renoir is pretty well unsaleable; there isn't a dealer in Europe who wouldn't look it up in a catalogue and find that it ought to be the property of Miss Eliot, of Rust Hall. But the El Greco, it seems, has recently turned up – and turned up quietly. Eliot got it

from the man who discovered it, and got it without any shouting; you can imagine his being shy of advertising the buying of a very costly picture. In fact a thief, if he knew the ropes and was uncommonly lucky, might just possibly make something considerable out of it. All of which is almost superfluous. We know well enough why the Renoir was chosen. It was a matter of striking – striking with remarkable nicety – at a sentiment.'

They were both silent. Appleby stretched out a hand and scratched at the black paint with a finger-nail. 'When', he asked suddenly, 'did you get to Rust?'

'Time for a late luncheon today.'

Appleby tapped the wall. 'Then it seems unlikely that you did this.' He smiled fleetingly. 'We do make progress.' He walked to the sofa and thrust thoughtfully with his foot at the long stool he had been examining. 'The picture was yanked off the wall none too gently and trailed along the carpet to that far window. It was done by somebody thoroughly familiar with this room.'

'However do you know that?'

'Because in what was probably a tolerably hurried manoeuvre the thief steered a course that allowed for unseen obstacles. He began rounding this sofa in such a way as to make one clean arc round both it and this long stool – which he couldn't possibly see – beyond. Information which is again superfluous.'

'Superfluous?' Winter looked doubtful. 'Well, I suppose we know that as this party has been held regularly for years, most of the people must be familiar with the room.'

'I wasn't thinking of that. I meant that we can be certain anyway that this is the most inside of jobs. Anyone must be familiar with this room who is so thoroughly familiar with Eliot's mind.'

They were silent again. 'As you say', said Winter presently, 'it struck with odd nicety at a sentiment. Eliot pleases himself, really, with his Spider; he couldn't otherwise had made such a success of him. But cherishing frustrated scholarly ambitions – Pope and all that – he likes to feel that Belinda inhabits a more serious world–'

'In Shoon Abbey, of all places,' interrupted Appleby.

Winter hesitated, looked curiously at his companion. 'No doubt Shoon has a rummy side. But that's by the way. Eliot has this notion of Belinda, and to have his own melodramatic creation appear to do *that*' – and Winter jerked a thumb at the wall – 'to his very beautiful birthday present was intensely humiliating. Far worse than the Birdwire affair; a shrewder, a more informed, blow. Much more likely to disgust him with his precious invention. Indeed, one gathers that the Spider – the Spider of the stories – is booked for oblivion. There will be no episode thirty-eight.'

'Birthday presents and birthday parties.' Gently Appleby thumped the sofa beside him. 'Winter, the crux is there! The Birthday Party. If we are to believe all that, then this joker has access to Eliot's very mind. Solve that riddle and one solves everything. I'm not sure that the problem mightn't afford you what you call intellectual excitement... Where do you think the picture is.'

'*You* suggest that it has been yanked out of that window.'

'And I'll suggest too that it has been yanked in again at another. There's something that conceivably squares with the Birdwire incident here; a sort of childish burlesque of crook and detective stuff. Why ever should the picture be hauled over a sill when it could be taken straight through a french window? The answer seems to be for the sake of leaving clues. The french windows open straight on the terrace; that sash window at the end has a flower-bed beneath it. And the flower-bed has quite comically exquisite footprints. It's just like the dust-wrapper of a story. And the wheels of a car have been backed on the bed too – of course they'll lose themselves on the terrace. It'll all be very Spidery. Or rather sub-Spidery – for I believe Eliot's yarns are now a good deal more sophisticated than that.'

'But if the picture has been brought in again we have only to hunt for it?'

'*Spiderismus* again. It appears that Rust is honeycombed with secret chambers. I've been in one. Quite comfy too.'

For the first time Winter looked not so much dejected as bewildered. 'I think', he said, 'I'll be going to bed. Before I came here I was warned not to walk into the parlour. I don't know that I want to walk down the secret passages.' He paused, apparently viewing this feeble joke with distaste. 'Yes,' he said, 'I think I'll be going.'

'Then goodnight.' Appleby chuckled. 'I had hoped the intellectual excitement wouldn't be beneath your notice. I'll struggle along.'

It was a challenge. Winter swung round. 'Is it really so absorbing?'

Appleby's smile had gone; he was looking thoughtfully at the floor. 'Winter, it appears

ragged – an untidy series of annoyances directed with malice and some knowledge. But I think it will knit up.'

'Knit up?'

'I don't think' – Appleby's response was oblique – 'that the joker is being wholly slapdash and lavish; on the contrary, his operations are probably economical enough. He's working steadily to gain some single end. But he may succumb to the lure of dissipation later. There hasn't, by the way, been any trouble at your college?'

Winter, who had paused in the act of going out, let his hand drop from the door-knob. 'Trouble in college – whatever do you mean?'

'I have a notion that the thing may spread. It began with a badgering of Eliot himself – getting him into embarrassing embroilments with his neighbours. I think it possible that others of the family may come to be persecuted in the same way. That's all.'

'I see. No, there has been nothing at Oxford – or Timmy has told me of nothing.' Winter's eye went from Appleby to the wall on which the Renoir had hung. He appeared to hesitate. 'By the way, something has come into my head. Rupert Eliot wants to hunt down what he calls the low blackguard. Just how low do you think the blackguard is?'

'I don't know that I've made an estimate.'

'It's just a point about the picture. You say it hasn't been stolen for gain, and I rather agree. But if the theft is simply a malicious gesture against Eliot's present to his daughter why a laborious theft at all? Why hide it away and paint

the spider on the wall? I believe that if I were a particularly low sort of blackguard I would be prompted to do my painting on the picture.'

Appleby looked momentarily as shocked as a police detective may decently look. 'It's a point,' he said.

'It suggests', Winter continued carefully, 'that the blackguard, while callous in respect of personal relationships, has some conscience in regard to works of art. You might look round for somebody like that. Such folk exist even among the most respectable.'

It was challenge for challenge. Appleby walked over to the open window. 'Winter,' he said, 'come here.' He flashed the torch on the flower-bed below; it travelled over a neat line of footprints in the damp earth. 'Clues,' he went on, 'and, as I say, I'm wasting no time on them.' There was a pause. 'You know, an affair like this does curiously evoke wanton impulses – even in what you term the most respectable. It's the crude instinct to get into the limelight, and it can unite with the refined play-instinct of the intellectual. Which is why I oughtn't to have talked of all this so lightly as being a matter for intellectual excitement. I don't suppose you are the perpetrator of this barbarous trick with Belinda's picture, and I don't want to waste effort on playing a game with you. There's been enough hide-and-seek tonight to last us some time. You've taken it into your over-ingenuous academic head to pitch clues at me for the amusement of seeing if I'm smart enough to pick them up. Lay off. I don't care twopence whether you cherish personal relationships or Attic pots or what.'

Winter sighed into the night. 'I lead a sheltered life, and it's a long time since I've been lectured.

But no doubt you're right.' His voice grew wholly sober. 'It is really so serious? I have a feeling that Eliot's mind is not so vulnerable as it appears.'

'I rather agree. As he went out just now I had an odd notion—' Appleby paused as if hunting for words.

'You felt that he has, though he doesn't show it himself, a shot in the locker still.'

'Exactly.' Appleby looked keenly at his companion. 'He doesn't know it, or knows it only in an obscurely subliminal way... I wish we could be sure that the persecution will stop short at its present forms. It may do that – perhaps ramifying out, as I have suggested, to include the children or the cousins. On the other hand all this may merely be preliminary play – a cat and mouse effect before the kill.'

'The kill? You mean that?'

They had been staring into darkness; now Appleby shut down the window and walked slowly to the centre of the room. 'Tonight', he said, 'we have had the Birthday Party. Think of it in italics: *The Birthday Party* – an old story Eliot never wrote. You know the title of the book he has been working on recently? *Murder at Midnight*. You know where it is set?'

'Indeed I don't.' Winter's voice was now strained as well as sober.

'No more do I. But my sister has had a guess. Folly Hall.'

PART TWO

Murder at Midnight

England heeled over and through clouds which loomed like cattle issuing from a murky fold light struck boldly at the spires of Canterbury. It flowed westward tower by tower, up the estuary of the Thames to grope vainly through fog for St Stephen's and Westminster Cathedral, up the narrowing river to touch the pinnacles of Magdalen, the great churches of the wool trade, the weathercock that circles high above the dust of Shakespeare. Southward and as the sun rode higher the light, struggling fitfully through a vapour-burdened sky, caught at lesser monuments: at Warter throwing a sudden glory over the red brick chapel by the post-office; creating a momentary minaret of the smoke-stack which crowns the blanket-factory at King's Cleeve. Dawn came to Wing; to Low Swaffham morning; there was common day at Pigg. In Wing the medieval glass glowed rich and dark; the mist stirred and drifted by the sallows of Low Swaffham; and the temperance institute at Pigg cast its diurnal challenge at the credence of the sun.

The temperance institute at Pigg is in the form of an early Saxon mede-hall. For this is the Shoon country; Pigg lies in the shadow of Shoon Abbey; has so lain for nearly ten years. Low Swaffham is on the eastern fringe, and Low Swaffham has a pair of stocks, a ducking-stool, a scold's bridle, a chastity-belt, and a chained library. Little Limber is on the opposite verge, and

here stands a public shelter with pound attached, the whole in the form of Caedmon's Cowshed, site of the composition of the first English lyric. Intermediate hamlets enjoy similar benefactions, various in form but all striking the same pronouncedly historical note, and all bearing a uniform inscription ending with the words *Donum Dedit Jasper Shoon Sacrosanctae Antiquitatis Amator*.

England heeled over the sun threaded the steel-spun ruins of Shoon Abbey itself, gliding down the great west tower to light the chill and naked concrete of the unfinished infirmary, peering through a curtain at the stertorous slumbers of the learned Dr Bussenschutt. But the sun – who is no antiquarian and is ever hunting the morrow – passed on unpausing; at Snug they began taking down the shutters; at La Hacienda near Snug white walls glittered – one wall more freshly white than the rest – and dogs howled; Lady Pike rang a bell and spoke of biscuits, Mrs Birdwire's Zulus moved heavily in the kitchens. The sun, lighting indifferently these and more sober things, passed on through Cold Findon, laid awakening fingers on Rust Hall, rolled across the park and striking through a final plantation of larches began to cast long shadows across Rust Heath beyond.

It was Saturday morning.

John Appleby opened his eyes and remembered the night. After the distressing events of the previous evening would the party go on? Probably it would. It was that sort of party and only the positive appearance, say, of a hearse trundling up the drive could be guaranteed to disperse it.

And frequent hearses, Appleby said to himself, shall besiege your gates. There was plenty of vindictiveness in Mr Eliot's Pope. And plenty of vindictiveness at Rust? – it would be comforting clarification if one could believe that the trouble lay in that: spite and revenge. Here lay the territory of the Eliot family history, and of those anomalous cousins, the literary Archie and the professedly active but indefinably lurking Rupert. Here too lay the territory of extra-familial grudges, of all the interests and emotions which must surround so big an affair as the Spider: the aggrieved Overall and the impatient Kermode. A large ground. But it would be comforting if it exhausted the possibilities.

Appleby prepared to jump out of bed and was prevented by the appearance of a young person with tea. Curious, to what Mr Eliot would call a speculative mind, that a young person should have to bring him tea and murmur that it was eight o'clock. Appleby sipped tea and munched bread and butter – an immaterial sliver, negligible for purposes of nutrition: we are surrounded by nugatory rituals. He remembered that, among other things, there was a picture to recover; it conjured itself up in his mind. Of something like the young person now drawing the curtains – only a shade plumper – Renoir could make all that. And his own life was given to unprofitable things: to preserving law and order that morning tea might arrive securely at unnumbered prosperous bedroom doors. And Mr Eliot's life – The young person had departed and Appleby jumped out of bed.

He threw open the window and looked out at a sky of dull grey watered silk, uncertainly shot with yellow light. Starlings were bubbling

somewhere overhead; a random impulse made him address them with more Pope:

*'Sol through white curtains shot a
tim'rous ray,*

*And ope'd those eyes that must eclipse
the day;*

*Now lap-dogs gave themselves the
rouzing shake – '*

He paused, startled. Somewhere near by the verses had been taken up in a modulations which put his own to shame:

*'And sleepless lovers, just at twelve
awake;*

*Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knocked
the ground,*

*And the present watch returned a silver
sound.*

*Belinda still her downy pillow pressed –
,*

The chanted lines, which came from the next window, seemed a species of invitation; Appleby slipped on a dressing-gown, went into the corridor, and knocked at his neighbour's door. A voice called, 'Come in!' He entered and found an apparently empty room. But the voice said, 'If we aren't liter-ayery!' A beautiful voice that seemed to speak from beneath the bed.

Appleby crossed the room. It was Peter Holme, lying supine before the window in his pyjama trousers. 'The control of the abdomen,' he said. 'No more of those ostentatious and futile jerks. One just lies on one's back and pushes one's belly in and out. You can eat my bread and butter.'

'Do you do this regularly?' Appleby ate the bread and butter and contemplated Holme's belly. In or out, it gave a beautiful straight line.

'Now and then – for conscience' sake. It's in my film contract, along with my weight and when I'm to go to bed and lord knows what.'

'Dear me, yours must be an exacting profession.'

'It's this awful Spider. They've taken it into their heads that he must be uncommonly spidery. Quite a new idea, too. When I took the old Spider to the States I made him sinisterly obese and it was a great success. There's no reason at all why a spider should be a skeleton. If you look at the nasty creatures you'll find that they're mostly a round, grey blob. It's just like those awful film folk. I curse the day I entered their so-called studios.' Peter Holme sprang lithely to his feet. 'You've seen the next in low joints in Paris. It's a hip roll.' He rolled.

'Marseille,' said Appleby absently. Here was a new light on the far-reaching consequences of Mr Eliot's genius. 'You find', he added encouragingly, 'your contract irksome?'

Holme gave Appleby a look which indicated that he thought this a pedantic and colourless form of expression. Then for some seconds he conscientiously rolled, finally breaking off to say challengingly, 'Look here, are you down at Rust in a professional way?'

'Not exactly. But I suppose I carry something of my profession about with me. I think you'll agree' – Appleby grinned inoffensively – 'that quite a lot of people do.'

With the effect of some instrument of precision coming to rest, Holme stopped rolling. 'Rust', he said, 'teems this year with quips and quipsters. But seriously' – his face flooded with seriousness as he spoke – 'you do intend to let the thing take its natural course?' The seriousness took on the quality of appeal which one wise man might address to another. 'It seems the only thing to do, doesn't it?'

'Its natural course? The general opinion seems to be that matters are pretty unnatural at the moment. Even supernatural if we are to believe Mrs Moule.' Appleby sat down on the bed and looked curiously at the actor.

'Of course I agree that the situation is odd.' Holme began to dress. 'But I feel it's rather what one might expect. Did you ever keep goldfish – I mean in an ambitious way?'

'Two fish and a bowl for a shilling; never anything more grandiose than that.'

'Ah. Well, now, the culture of goldfish is exceedingly interesting. It has gone on for thousands of years and the creatures are the nearest thing to a purely artificial creation breathing. Do fish breathe?'

'Decidedly.'

'I thought they did. As I say, they are highly organized and over-exploited organisms. The result is that they are very unstable. At any time the oddest things may happen. They will emerge without fins – and fish, it seems, simply must

have fins – or with far more fin than fish. The creatures are in a state of artificial perfection, with very little relation to any state of nature, and in consequence they are liable to grotesque breakdowns. I have an idea it may be rather the same with Spiders.'

Appleby pondered this suggestion. 'I don't think', he said, 'that I've ever heard a more imaginatively confused or intellectually worthless analogy. Did you think of it yourself?'

'I thought of it', said Holme, unoffended, 'just before I got up. I don't say that it's exactly philosophical, but I think you're a bit hard on it, all the same. Think of all that talk yesterday about creating autonomous worlds, and lord knows what. It's true, in a way. Poor old Eliot has created a large, ramshackle and highly artificial world of his own that sprawls through thirty-seven volumes. It's natural enough that something should go wrong: two heads on one neck or fins in the most unlikely place.'

'Your thought is much less coherent than Mrs Moule's. In fact, you have a muddled mind.'

Reaching up for a jacket in a posture that almost perfectly evoked the Apollo Belvedere, Peter Holmes nodded amiable agreement. 'Quite so,' he said. 'I haven't the dimmest notion what it's all about. But I do think' – he spoke with sudden exquisite earnestness – 'it should be left alone. I had a talk with Eliot yesterday – I'm not sure I didn't mention it to some people in the billiard-room before you came. I gathered that he really did think of giving over. It was a grey day, just like this. But do you know, the sun seemed to shine and the birds to break into song.'

'And the goldfish to whisk their redundant tails.'

'Just that. I sent a wire to my agent at once. And it's all right.'

'All right?'

Holme's face assumed an expression of preternatural cunning. 'Kermode,' he said. 'I thought at once of Kermode. Vassalage to that renegade hearty would be quite the last straw. But it's perfectly all right. I'm tied up for plays done out of books written by Eliot himself – nothing else. So I do think things should be let alone.'

'I see. In one direction at least your clarity of vision is abundant and undisputable.'

'But, mind you,' continued Holme as if suddenly anxious to vindicate himself, 'though I may be muddled I'm quite open-minded. I've no theory at all. And I didn't a bit sympathize with the line Chown was taking when he blew in this morning.'

'Chown blew in this morning?' Appleby was surprised.

'With the bird of dawning Chown blew in – for professional consultation.'

'Professional consultation? He surely doesn't think that you are positively–'

'Officer, officer! You're getting it wrong; Chown came in to consult *me*. A clever fellow, really. He realizes – unlike those awful newspapers – that an actor is the best critic of acting. One day I'm going to be a dramatic critic and eat as much as I like.'

'An actor', said Appleby, 'is always likely to be the best actor. I wouldn't myself go further than

that. But tell me about Chown.'

The bubbling innocence of Peter Holme might have been thought to subside momentarily into thoughtfulness; he seized a phial from the dressing-table and applied its aromatic contents to his waving chestnut hair. 'Chown', he said, 'has quite taken old Eliot into his bughouse fold. I gather Eliot was patient of his for a bit some years ago. Now he says it's his duty to protect him.'

'What's that – Eliot was a patient of Chown's?' Appleby was suddenly vividly interested. 'You're sure of that?'

'I can't say I am. The old boy's a stickler for his professional etiquette except when he's feeling a bit shirty. I just got that impression – that Eliot had been to Chown without telling the family. And anyway, he's all for wading in now. This opinion of mine he was after: he seemed to feel it might help him to sort things out. That's why I wasn't awfully keen on him. And why I'm not sure that I feel at all keen on you. I'm opposed to sorting things out at all; in my view it would be a great pity.'

'And Chown – how does he want to sort things out? Just what was he after?'

Holme shook his head, his expression more vacuous and cunning than before. 'That's secrets,' he said, 'but I'll tell you this: the old boy went off as pleased as punch – like a kid that's found a particularly rare bug. And, as I say, it was smart of him to come along.'

'It might be described', said Appleby, 'as leaving no stone unturned.'

Retreating to the corridor, Appleby ran into a large, moist sponge. Behind it was Gerald Winter.

'I had begun to think', said Winter absurdly, 'that you were only a curious dream. And here you are again – as solid as the kind who stand outside the Houses of Parliament; a portly man, to be a sergeant able.' He peered at Appleby in the half light. 'And – alas! – impervious to impertinence. Tell me: what are you? The whole house seethes with curiosity. The assistant-commissioner?'

'A chief-inspector, CID. And now curb your morning gamesomeness. Do you know this Peter Holme? Is he really and truly the light-comedy figure that he appears?'

'Tell me if Congreve's fools be fools indeed.'

Appleby raised a protesting hand. 'Today's motto', he said, 'is *No Popery*. What do you really know of Holme?'

'That he's a good actor and consequently an able man. And that if anyone has been treating him somewhat as a patch of motley he will apply his art to the amusement of playing you up. By the way, I have news.'

Well, well.'

'But you shan't have it.' Winter glanced up and down the corridor. 'As a matter of fact, it's this. You remember how you were affirming that the theft of the Renoir must be the most inside of jobs? That made me run over all the other pranks I've heard of and consider their insideness or outsideness. And I've just been talking to Timmy about it from the heart of a cold shower. After all, I did come down to probe, and I might as well make some show. What I've gathered is simply

that everything might have been done from the outside. As in the matter of the picture, knowledge of the household and its ways is implied. But as far as physical considerations go the joker may stand entirely outside Rust. The crux, of course, is the business of the manuscripts.'

'Quite so.'

'You know about their being kept in a cupboard, unlocked. Well, the house is kept unlocked too. Eliot is accustomed to keep late hours, and none of the servants waits up. Any shutting up of the house he does himself; and according to Timmy that's just none at all. Even during the period that the manuscripts were misbehaving nobody thought to impose any sort of check and control.' Winter paused. 'The first thing I felt about Rust was that nobody would ever solve a mystery here.'

'You were wrong. Not that special difficulties don't exist. For instance Eliot's secretary, who might have been particularly useful, has been inconveniently eliminated. And Eliot himself makes a classical little problem in approach. I badly want a little family history and Eliot is the proper person to get it from. But can I do it?'

Winter shrugged his shoulders. 'Search me.'

'I will – and everybody else in the household, in a metaphorical way. But at the moment I want the family ghosts and skeletons.'

'I should try the servants. Talking of the classics, I've always understood that to be the classical method.'

Perpetually about Winter there hovered this suggestion of challenge. 'Very well', said Appleby

briefly; 'I will.'

Miss Cavey nibbled a pen and contemplated her dangling puppies. She had on the table before her books explaining reflex actions, *rigor mortis*, and the anatomy of *canis vulgaris*, or the dog. Nevertheless the thing was not going too well. The fourth puppy, unskilfully strung up by her heroine, was making heartrending noises. The noises were a difficulty. Indicated by conventional collocations of the consonants *g* and *r* the effect was trite and unmoving. But anything phonetically more accurate proved both elusive to catch and complicated to render. Miss Cavey strained her inward ear – that organ which is at once the bliss and the agony of the novelist in her solitude – and shut her inward eye, even meditating for a moment the transposing of her whole great scene into darkness. This, however, would introduce great technical difficulties of its own; Miss Cavey retained daylight and in despair cut down the fourth puppy and began again. This time she must remember to put in copious salivation. And a slowly glazing eye. The tail would twitch rhythmically – and there would be abundant pathos in the thought that it seemed almost to be wagging for its cruel little mistress... Miss Cavey discovered that she was hungry. Laying aside her manuscript, she descended to breakfast.

On the staircase – disastrously, for her peace of mind – she overtook Archie Eliot and slapped him heartily on the back. For Miss Cavey, once more in full reaction from her tragic theme and with the prospect of an ample material recruitment awaiting her below, was filled with jollity. 'My dear old superannuated Watson,' she

said robustly, 'you look no whit the worse for your spot of dope.'

Archie turned round with placid courtesy. 'My five grey hairs', he murmured, 'and ruined fortune flout.'

'What's that?'

'Nothing, my dear lady; nothing at all. I happened just to be thinking of an old curse.' Archie momentarily opened his heavy eyes in an innocent and dangerous stare. 'And how nice that we have met. I shall be your guide through the maze of Richard's sumptuous chafing-dishes and then we shall have a little chat. As it happens I particularly want your advice. And here is André. Perhaps we shall let him make a third.' The little translator had come pattering downstairs after them.

Breakfast during the Rust parties was a straggling affair. The chafing-dishes, if not sumptuous, were numerous, and there was an intermittent attendance on them by Mr Eliot's butler, Bowles, and his assistant – a youth whose baptismal name had been forgotten, for he was prescriptively known as Joseph. Archie obtained a kipper from Joseph and André coffee from Bowles; these were set solicitously before Miss Cavey, and her attendants took their places on each side of her. Wedge was a little way down the table, casting an appreciative eye over his own advertisements in a pile of newspapers; a group of half-a-dozen people was chattering animatedly at the far end of the room.

'I hope', said Archie earnestly, 'that you slept well after the Birthday Party. We are all very much upset that our guests should have had so disturbed an evening.'

'Very upset indeed,' corroborated André. During his sojourns at Rust he liked to identify himself thoroughly with the household.

'Thank you; after a time I slept very well.' Light – as often happens – had come to Miss Cavey hard upon the first mouthful of kipper. She would have a storm outside and the noises emanating from the fourth puppy would be described as a sort of feeble echo of the elements. She took another bite. 'That young man over there', she said suddenly, 'is looking at me in a very odd way.'

Archie turned round. 'Joseph? It is just his rather uncouth manner. I am afraid that my cousin is unexact about the menservants. And Belinda is now much away from home.' Archie paused and looked at Miss Cavey with the most friendly anxiety. 'When ignorance is bliss', he murmured, 'tis folly to be wise.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I was reflecting', said Archie. 'that you ought to be told. Perhaps you will be able to advise us. André, do you not agree?'

'Agree?' For a moment André looked blank. 'Oh, decidedly, my dear Eliot; very decidedly indeed. I would go as far as to say that *Miss Cavey must know*.' André, with no idea of what he was talking, looked very solemn indeed.

Or perhaps outside there might be a dry, autumnal heath and the rustling of the wind in the withered harebells might be echoed in little, dry, horrid gasps from all the puppies in a row. But Miss Cavey's mind was now only half on her stark creation; her eye was once more on Joseph. 'Really,' she said, 'there is something very curious indeed about the manner of that young man by

the sideboard. He appears to be quite fascinated by me.'

'Perhaps', said Archie soothingly, 'he is feeling unwell.' He turned round and glanced at Joseph. 'He is certainly paying you a good deal of attention.' For a moment Archie transferred his gaze thoughtfully to the ceiling. 'When I come to think of it', he continued, 'Joseph is a remarkable lad. He came to us as a boy from somewhere in the Hebrides; as you may know, my cousin's late wife was the daughter of a proprietor there.' Archie paused again in order that this piece of territorial information might have proper acknowledgement. 'And Joseph is said to be gifted with the second sight.'

'The second sight?' Miss Cavey's attention was fully caught. 'How very interesting! I am particularly keen on all that sort of thing. In my new novel—'

'It is curious,' pursued Archie musingly, 'that Joseph should suddenly become interested in *you*. André, are you not inclined to take the same view?'

'Decidedly.' André spoke with the ready confidence of one who has fallen into a role. 'It strikes me at once as being peculiar – more than peculiar, indeed.'

Miss Cavey looked a shade uncertainly at her companions. 'I really don't see—'

'But this quite extraneous topic', pursued Archie, 'must not divert me from what I was going to tell you. Last night we had the Birthday Party. And it is impossible not to ask: what shall we have next?'

'It is impossible', said André formally, 'not to put this question to oneself *with the gravest anxiety.*'

'I don't pretend' – Archie placidly sipped coffee – 'to say what agency is at work in the peculiar manifestations which are going on around us. Rupert believes that some low scoundrel is at work; but, of course, Rupert's mind would turn that way naturally enough. Others feel that something preternatural is involved. And certainly the affair has one very strange aspect; the phenomena seem to tap my cousin's most secret mind. Last night we had a species of enactment of a story he never committed to paper. What may we look for now? It is here that I have disturbing news.' Archie stopped off and favoured Miss Cavey with a hard, blue, calculating stare. 'If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.'

'Cry aloud' – André threw sudden genius into his task as chorus – 'with a long lamentation; cry aloud for an end is at hand!'

Under these minatory citations Miss Cavey abandoned her kipper. 'You mean', she asked, 'that there is some danger ahead?'

'You must not be alarmed – not *unduly* alarmed. For some years, as your delightful fun on the staircase tells me you are aware, I have been lucky enough to afford my cousin a fragment of his inspiration – a humorous fragment.' Archie's placid smile spread momentarily to the display of two yellow canine teeth. 'In his books there is an engineer – an unsuccessful engineer, of somewhat obtuse mind perhaps, but fond of books – with whom Richard's literary and – ah – commercial friends' – and Archie made a gesture round the now populous dining-room – 'are accustomed, no

doubt on good grounds, to identify me.' At this embarrassing point Archie amiably paused and Miss Cavey, though her creative absorptions left her little energy for random sensitiveness, looked quite uncomfortable. 'But in return for this slight service I have my privileges. Not only am I hospitably maintained at Rust; I have occasionally the pleasure of hearing or seeing something of my talented cousin's plans. And I can tell you that he has for some time been working on a romance called *Murder at Midnight*. An exciting title, is it not? By the way, which room have they given you this year?'

Miss Cavey jumped. 'Which room? Why, the little one by itself under the tower.'

André, who had been exploring after kidneys, returned in time to say, 'Ah!'

'Now,' continued Archie with quiet reasonableness, 'what we are afraid of is this. We have had the Birthday Party; may we not have Murder at Midnight too? Our apprehensions, my dear André, are of that, are they not?'

'Of just that. We are afraid that some poor woman may really be murdered.'

'A woman?' Miss Cavey had pushed her unfinished kipper nervously away.

Archie nodded seriously. 'A woman,' he corroborated. 'Dear me, there is Joseph looking at you in that peculiar way again.'

Miss Cavey made a last effort after self-control. 'I don't believe he's looking at me in – in the way you seem to suggest. It's much more as if he were stripping me of my clothes.'

'My dear lady, pray keep calm. If we are calm we have a much better chance of facing the thing

out. To begin with: who is the woman likely to be?' Archie deliberately scanned Mr Eliot's guests. 'We have only a slight description.'

'A description?'

'The body is described as that of a well-nourished woman in middle life.'

Miss Cavey rose abruptly. 'I have something', she said with resolution, 'to look up in a timetable.'

'Of course my knowledge of my cousin's story is slight. I believe that at present there are alternative versions. In one the unfortunate woman dies in her bedroom – rather an isolated room. In the other nemesis overtakes her as she is endeavouring to fly from her persecutors.'

Miss Cavey sat down again. 'Do you know', she asked in a strained voice, 'how she dies? Is it something – something painful?'

André rose brilliantly to the occasion. 'She is strung up', he said, 'with a window cord. They rush in and discover her just as she gives her last wriggle; her last dry horrid gasp.'

'And here', said Archie, 'is Richard. Richard, old fellow, I fear Miss Cavey is a little unwell. She has been annoyed by Joseph.'

Saturday was full of incident, as befitted the crowning day of the Spider's party. But it opened with abundant talk – particularly for Appleby, who found himself at breakfast once more in the company of Winter. His sister and Timmy Eliot were opposite, and in this Winter found material for mild amusement. He offered Patricia an appreciative analysis of the personality of Hugo Toplady, appealing to Timmy for corroboration point by point and concluding with a mysterious exhortation to scorn not the sonnet and the yet more mysterious verdict that if only Toplady were chocolate-coloured he would be perfect. In vain Timmy offered his tutor a virgin copy of *The Times*. No sooner did the theme of Toplady verge on the tedious than Winter was off on another tack.

'You and I, Miss Appleby, are committed to professions, but Timmy still has the delight of choosing. We were consulting about it in the train yesterday.' He addressed himself to a Timmy who was endeavouring gallantly enough not to turn sulky. 'I had an idea which I forgot to put to you. It was suggested by those seducing photographs which they fasten above the seats; there was Bridlington' – he turned to Appleby and threw him a phrase like a biscuit – 'a sickle of sand on which departed holidaymakers palely loitered in bleaching sepias: and why, I thought, should Timmy not come unto those sepia sands? There was Ludlow Castle' – he spoke again to his pupil

– ‘and it was Ludlow Castle that really put the thing in my head. Why, Timmy, should you not buy a bus and conduct superior literary tours?’ He glanced at Patricia. ‘You know, he has the instinct of showmanship.’

Appleby allowed his thoughts to depart elsewhere; when they returned Winter was still discoursing on his new theme. ‘Shrines, Timmy! Make it an Eliot’s Luxury Pilgrimage this year. Here Gaveston, ladies and gentlemen, made the following plans for amusing the king.’

It was approaching the harangue which the man generally avoided. But Winter, unaccountably raising his voice, talked on. ‘Vividly, Miss Appleby, it rises before one! The courtyard of the ruined castle, above its crumbled silhouette rooks tossing against a chilly sky, on the drawbridge the great char-à-banc – scarlet, and blazoned in gold *Miss Guinivere* or perhaps *The Seige Perilous* – purring its gentle impatience, the little group of tourists with cameras and pamphlets and notebooks – wistful schoolmistresses plucking the barren rose of York or Lancaster, eccentric businessmen gathering material for provincial literary societies – and in the midst Timmy himself’ – Winter’s voice rose higher still – ‘declaiming amid the mouldering but yet resonant walls–’

And Winter started to declaim – something that appeared to be out of Marlowe’s *Edward II*. By this time, however, it was clear that he had been talking in calculated opposition to a disturbance at the other end of the table. And that he was beaten. Timmy’s proposed career as cicerone faded into silence; the group became embarrassed spectators of what was going forward.

'A scene,' said Timmy bitterly. 'Of course there is always a scene or two during a party. But with a servant! Lord, lord, lord.'

'Timmy' – Patricia's voice was challenging – 'your mind glides at once to scruples. Though I agree it would have been nicer if the woman had assaulted Wedge. Your father – how cheerful he seems – is being very competent and has got the bewildered young man out of the room. And there goes old Bowles; he seems most upset of all. I wonder what it was all about?'

Timmy shook a gloomy head. 'Archie and that little André were sitting beside the woman; I expect they were amusing themselves with some ingenious piece of baiting, so that she lost her head. But why she should go head down for Joseph I can't imagine.'

'As a matter of fact,' said Patricia, 'I did once or twice see Joseph looking at her in an odd way.' She glanced ironically at Winter and her brother. 'I'm not sure that the tale of mysteries isn't gaining on you. And I'm all for these minor jokes and scandals; they strike me as healthy.' She cautiously whistled a couple of bars from the leitmotiv of the Spider.

Timmy looked at her doubtfully. 'Whatever do you mean? That they keep this awful party pleasantly occupied and amused?'

'I mean that the more petty operations, the less likelihood of any major sinister design.'

Looking up from the interrupted breakfast to which he had decorously returned, Winter gestured a vigorous intellectual dissent. 'A most dangerous notion. A lot of foolery may easily be employed to cloak a single vital operation. Alternatively, it may give such an operation an

artistic atmosphere or setting. Or alternatively again, there may be more lurking operations than one. A joke by *A* may give the notion of a crime or misdemeanour to *B*. Wheels within wheels.'

Appleby chuckled appreciatively. 'You've little to learn.' He rose. 'Meanwhile I had better pursue my disagreeable profession. Spying telegrams about other guests.' He took out a pencil, glanced innocently at Winter, licked it and began laboriously to write on a page torn from a notebook, his tongue following the motion of his hand.

'John,' said Patricia, 'when you try to be funny you are quite awful.'

'That, my dear, may be true of our joker too. And now I'm taking Winter's advice and am off to sneak round the servants. It is the psychological moment.' He turned seriously to Timmy. 'I don't think I'll bother your father about it. So do you mind?'

'Certainly not. This, as we all know, is Folly Hall. But I think you ought to take Winter, too. He said he was confident that he could solve—'

'There are fictions', said Winter, 'that pall. And Miss Appleby and I are going to have another cup of coffee.'

Appleby's sneaking began, appropriately though fortuitously, with a piece of successful eavesdropping. Going in search of Bowles and the unfortunate Joseph, he got lost; getting lost, he paused; and pausing, he heard a voice say: 'Eliot has bounced up again; the thing's failed.'

The words were sufficiently intriguing and Appleby eavesdropped with a will. He was in a

shadowy corridor which led uncertainly towards the offices; the voice came through the half-open door of some nondescript public room.

'Failed?' A second voice struck in – a sepulchral voice, rather like that of Hamlet's father, but of inferior resonance. 'The thing's failed?' The second voice contrived to imply that failure is the most nearly universal of conditions. 'One can learn a great deal from failure. I feel myself that I have learnt more from my failures than from my successes.'

'Heaven preserve me from *your* successes,' said the first voice ferociously and rudely. 'The point is it's as you were.'

'As *I* was?'

'No, you fool. I mean we're back where we started.'

'*Did* we start?' The sepulchral voice Appleby recognized as belonging to the unsuccessful Gib Overall; the other was Kermode's – that uneasy ghost. And the conversation promised to be apocalyptic. To clear up a mystery by lurking behind a door is distinctly inglorious. But Appleby's profession was not one which afforded luxuries, and he listened with all his ears.

'*You've* started,' said Kermode sullenly; 'and pretty well come to a full stop again. When I start I'll keep moving. But I've never been let.'

'Did you really expect--'

'The whole house knows he was next to nuts and on the point of chucking in his hand. And now, just because of the way the thing's been found, he's as right as a rivet.'

'Kermode, isn't it *trivet*?'

It was apparent that Kermode was labouring under emotion; he qualified rivet and trivet alike with a string of lurid epithets, and when he fell silent his violent breathing sounded clearly in the corridor.

'You say because of the way the thing's been found-?' Overall appeared to be dully curious.

'He's taken it into his head that it's something quite remote from the way his own precious and refined mind works. He wouldn't touch such a situation with a barge pole. And therefore it can't be a matter of his imaginings coming alive on him, but a common trick. I think myself it's damned funny; it's just the sort of thing I'd be gingering up the books with if I had my innings.' Kermode paused broodingly. 'The man', he concluded disgustedly, 'is clean crazy.'

'I thought you said' – Overall's voice was painfully puzzled – 'that crazy was just what he was *not*.'

But Kermode was in no mood for logic. He roared – so threateningly that there were sounds as of Overall making hastily for the door. Appleby rapidly withdrew. The conversation, he told himself sadly, was at once mysterious and completely ambiguous. And there is nothing more annoying than to overhear riddles. He pursued his way pondering.

Bowles was in his room, in great darkness. Perhaps because he associated Appleby with the bringing of light, perhaps because he understood him to be more in the confidence of his master than was quite the case, he was at once communicative. His first remarks were in defence of Joseph. Joseph was a steady lad, of a respectable ancestry both in and out of livery,

and the orthodoxy of his training had been Bowles' special care. But there were situations with which he had naturally not been taught to cope. Perhaps he was a little too impressionable; the thing had fascinated him and he had no doubt stared at the lady in a way it was not his place to do. As a matter of fact, when pointed out to him, the thing had not a little compelled the notice of Bowles himself. Bowles wasn't one for the arts; the bent of his private interests was political. And no more was Joseph's, whose leisure hours were given to football coupons – deplorable devices not tolerated when England was still governed by the gentry. Perhaps because of this the thing had come on them with a particular shock. Bowles ventured the opinion that the lady's conduct was a little lacking in what one was entitled to expect in an employers' class. He was glad to have received some support for this view from Mr Eliot himself.

Appleby listened discreetly while these further riddles were ramblingly unfolded; he had no desire to hurry Bowles, whose life had plainly long owned a dignified tempo of its own. And presently the key emerged. The Renoir had turned up again. Joseph had wakened to find himself in bed with it.

'In a manner of speaking, that is to say,' qualified Bowles. 'The poor lad – as decent a lad as you could wish and as chaste-minded as is natural for a lad to be – woke up and there was the thing perched at the bed's foot and sort of looking sideways down at him. I don't suppose he'd ever noticed the picture while it was on the wall – it's not the place of servants to take account of such things – and finding it like that gave him a real turn, one can't doubt. You'd have

been startled yourself, Mr Appleby, though no doubt accustomed to such situations.'

Being a little doubtful of Bowles' meaning. Appleby cautiously agreed that he was fond of pictures and had given them some study. 'And what', he asked, 'of Miss Cavey?'

'Well, sir, that's the funny part - the unfortunate part I should say if I'm to express myself correctly. After this had happened and when Miss Cavey came in to breakfast, Joseph was seized with a queer notion about her and the picture. If you'll imagine the lady in - well, Mr Appleby, in an inadequate garment, you'll be imagining something very like what this painter must have had in front of him. And yet the lady and the picture can't be called at all alike. They have quite different sorts of attractiveness, if you follow me. And that's what had a queer fascination for Joseph so that he couldn't take his eyes off Miss Cavey. I wouldn't call him a thinking lad, Mr Appleby, but he'd suddenly hit on a philosophical problem. Of course' - concluded Bowles with irrelevant satisfaction - 'we're a philosophical household in a way, both the master and Miss Belinda being great scholars. I sometimes think it a pity Mr Eliot doesn't keep a little more to that line.'

Appleby noted in passing that Bowles seemed mildly to share in the general disapproval which Mr Eliot's activities engendered at Rust. He noted further that much in the conversation which he had recently overheard was now explained. 'I think', he said, 'that Joseph is to be congratulated on discovering something about art. He has been the victim of a most disgraceful trick, and we can only sympathize with him.'

'I'm glad you take that view, sir. I understand the lady wouldn't have flown at the lad if she hadn't taken ill some chaff that was being offered her by Archibald.'

Appleby nodded absently. 'To use such a picture for a joke of that kind', he said, 'is an outrage of which my friends in the criminal classes are quite incapable.'

'Yes, sir. I can't say that I have those feelings myself – though I'm acquainted with them, if you understand me. They come with money, Mr Appleby; with money enjoyed for several generations. Sir Rupert, now, is very angry; he says the horrible blackguard must be found.'

'Ah, yes – Sir Rupert. And what about Mr Eliot?'

'Well, now, there's a curious thing. As you can see, Mr Appleby, I'm very much upset; such a thing hasn't happened at Rust before, I assure you. And you might expect the master himself to be very much upset indeed; he's a sensitive man, as you no doubt know, and there has been a lot to worry him lately. But, if anything, he seemed pleased at the way the picture had turned up. I can quote his words, sir. "Bowles," he said, "the thing is some vulgar foolery we needn't take account of. And tell Miss Belinda to manage people as she can till luncheon ; I'm going out to see Laslett about his bullocks." At that he left me and away he went as tranquil as could be. He'd got a bit down the drive – this was only a few minutes ago, Mr Appleby – when he turned back, thoughtful gentleman that he always is, to say that if Joseph was feeling awkward he might go to his cousins at Wing till the party was over, and if he did would I manage as I could. I sometimes think in my old-fashioned way that it's something

of a privilege to be in service at Rust – Mr Eliot being so truly benevolent.’

To this respectable manorial sentiment Appleby paid the tribute of a few moments’ silence. It took him this space to persuade himself that Mr Eliot’s reactions, though surprising, were not incoherent. The man, in Kermode’s phrase, had bounced up again, and Appleby increasingly suspected that he always would bounce up. If, as one might for the moment presume, a persecutor was aiming at Mr Eliot’s sanity he had chosen a deceptive mark. His victim was easily harassed, but he had quite remarkable resources for recovering mental equilibrium. Mr Eliot’s creation had been made to become alive, had performed embarrassing and alarming tricks, had quite frighteningly reached into the recesses of his creator’s mind. Mr Eliot, easily worked upon imaginatively, had behaved, when faced with all this, oddly but with admirable biological healthiness – calling in his reason to throw up a breastwork of metaphysical speculation. From this refuge, sufficient for a time, he had been ingeniously dislodged the night before. The assault on Belinda’s picture had been a blow against which philosophical detachment was inadequate. It had been this because it had turned The Spider – Mr Eliot’s own creation for the market-place – against the symbol of a private emotional relation; had done this at a time when Mr Eliot had persuaded himself that the disconcerting things happening around him were in some obscurely metaphysical way his own responsibility. The persecutor had been subtle enough; it was more interesting that he had promptly overreached himself.

The joke with the Renoir had fallen into two parts; theft and recovery. The first had been wholly successful, so that Mr Eliot had gone to bed a bewildered and perhaps defeated man. The second had been a fiasco. The design had been further to harass Mr Eliot by further insulting Belinda; the means had been the dumping of Renoir's bathing woman into the bed of a footman. Such a thought was as vulgar as could be, and out of its vulgarity, Mr Eliot had – it appeared – brilliantly snatched his equilibrium once more. Such antics were not within the province of his craft; they were, indeed, so completely alien to his mind that his mind could have nothing to do with them. It followed that his recent and disturbing speculations were at fault; that all the tricks which had been taking place were extraneous foolery, best accounted for by rational explanations. Mr Eliot had arrived, by a devious course enough, at a position from which he would have done better never to have departed: that somebody was having a joke on him. His astonishing resilience had triumphed and for the moment he had dismissed the whole matter in favour of Laslett's bullocks. As Kermode had declared, the position was one of as-you-were.

Appleby contemplated his own effort at psychological reconstruction and provisionally accepted it. There remained a number of problems. The most beguiling – though not perhaps the most urgent – of these was the problem of the joker's prescience. The joker had known, for example, that Mr Eliot had once meditated a story called *The Birthday Party*, and that this story was to include among its elements a particular method of interfering with a lighting system, the use of a drug, some operation

concerning a picture, perhaps some business of footprints outside a window: these elements the joker had confusedly used in the enactment of something like a dream-version of the story. But Mr Eliot declared that he had never committed a fragment of the story to paper. And of this prescience there had apparently been other examples – difficult, unfortunately, to elicit from so elusive a person as the owner of Rust. What was the explanation?

Another and severely practical problem had to be considered. This was Folly Hall. Was Folly Hall the name Mr Eliot had given to the scene of *Murder at Midnight*? If so, what was likely to happen? Did the fact that Mr Eliot had rebounded from an elaborate and insidious attack upon his state of mind conceivably put him in different and more immediate danger? Only a knowledge of the kind and degree of malice behind the manifestations would make an answer to this question more than a guess.

It was with this thought in his mind that Appleby now pursued his enquiries. And as he cast about in his mind for an opening he found Bowles' final words echoing conveniently in his head.

'Mr Eliot's benevolence', he offered solemnly, 'must make him generally beloved in his household.'

'Undoubtedly, Mr Appleby.' Without rising to the bait Bowles yet contrived to imply that Appleby's observation was more to the credit of his heart than of his knowledge of human nature.

'And yet he certainly has an enemy somewhere – as witness all these vexatious tricks.'

'Very true, sir.' Bowles nodded sagely, as one who is aware that the decent exchange of platitudes is among the necessary amenities of social intercourse. 'I never did think, Mr Appleby, that the master greatly enjoyed these parties. He's of the retiring sort, sir – and particularly so with books and writing-people and the like. He prefers his books quick and his authors dead, as you might say; and not the other way about.' Bowles, seemingly unconscious of having achieved a devastating commentary on his employer's literary acquaintance, shook a gloomy head. 'It's done great things for Rust, I won't deny. But I never did think good would come of it in the end.'

'You mean of Mr Eliot's pursuit of popular literature?'

'Just that, Mr Appleby. I'm prejudiced, I dare say. Nothing of the sort has run in any family with which I've been connected before. I was at Scamnum Court as a lad, and it's true that Duke would write an occasional monograph on fish – but you'll agree that that's not quite the same thing. And the Marquis of Kincrae – his heir, as you know, Mr Appleby – did once put out a book of verses. But he was known to be peculiar, poor gentleman, and had to be sent away to govern something in the end. And I doubt–'

'So you feel' – Appleby boldly interrupted these aristocratic reminiscences – 'that the mischief probably lies among the people with whom Mr Eliot has become acquainted through his books? My experience is that troubles of this sort are more commonly family affairs.'

'Indeed, sir.'

Appleby was on the point of giving up; but he tried a final direct appeal. 'As you know, I am a police-officer, though not here officially. I feel, for what my feeling is worth, that you are not yet through with these troublesome incidents at Rust, and that they may assume a much graver character than hitherto. It seems desirable to collect what information I can as quickly as possible. The household is an unusual one. I should like you to tell me what you feel you can about the family history.'

For a moment Bowles looked doubtful. But Appleby's little speech had been framed with professional skill, and the butler was impressed. He cleared his throat. 'I fear it's scarcely my gift, sir, but I'll do what I can. There's really little to tell – or little that I know to tell of. It will be proper, I think, to begin with the baronetcy.'

Appleby agreed that the baronetcy would be a good starting point.

'Well, sir, although there have been Eliots at Rust time out of mind the baronetcy is something quite recent – recent in itself and more recent still as having any connexion with this house and estate. All baronets, I understand, are more or less new-fangled; I've heard the Duke of Horton remark more than once that they and the counter-jumpers spring up together. Be that as it may' – Bowles seemed conscious that he must not let his more exalted past obtrude – 'the first Eliot baronet was little more than a century back, and what estates he had were in Cumberland – nowhere near Rust. Sir Gervase – who was the grandfather of Mr Eliot as well as of Sir Rupert and Mr Archibald – was the first of that line to own Rust Hall, and he came to it after his fathers for near three generations had owned nothing at

all. This Sir Gervase came to Rust and died not long after, about the end of the reign of the old Queen. He had four sons: Sir Herbert, who was father of our Sir Rupert; Timothy, that had Herbert, Charles, and John; John, that had Timothy and our Mr Richard; and Charles, that had Mr Archie, or Sir Arcibald as now is. I hope, Mr Appleby, I make myself clear.'

'Gervase', said Appleby, 'had Herbert, Timothy, John, and Charles. Herbert had Rupert. Timothy had Herbert, Charles, and John. John had Timothy and Richard. Charles had Archibald. Go on.'

'Well, sir' – Bowles stole a cautious glance at Appleby, rather as if he were something in a show – 'the interesting thing is this. Title and lands having drifted together so late in the day, they weren't it seems tied fast together by the lawyers. But Sir Gervase held Rust, and his son Sir Herbert held Rust, and *his* son Rupert was brought up at Rust in the expectation of holding Rust too. I don't doubt the point will have its interest for you, Mr Appleby.' There was perhaps a hint of irony in Bowles' voice, but he continued soberly enough. 'Not that there was much to hold, I understand. For by this time the affairs of Rust were in a poor way.'

'Now, Mr Appleby, when Sir Herbert was here at Rust, and his son, Rupert, a lad not yet ripe for Eton, Sir Herbert's second brother, John, was taken away. He was a widower, and he died none too well off and leaving two orphan boys, Timothy and our Mr Richard. Sir Herbert took the boys and brought them up at Rust along with Rupert; they were much of an age, all three. You'll notice how far at that time Mr Richard was from having any expectation of coming into Rust.'

There was first Rupert, the baronet that was to be. Then there were the three cousins, Herbert and Charles and John, who were the sons of his father's elder brother, Timothy. And then there was his elder brother, also a Timothy. Nevertheless Mr Eliot was to come into Rust, for what it was worth. His cousins died childless, as did his own brother too. And Rupert – I'll have to come to that, I fear – was disinherited by his father, Sir Herbert.'

Appleby lifted his head sharply. 'One moment. Sir Rupert had no legitimate children?'

'None, sir.'

'Then if Mr Timmy died Sir Archibald, as the only son of Sir Gervase's youngest son, Charles, would succeed Sir Rupert in the baronetcy?'

'Yes, Mr Appleby. If I may say so, you have an uncommon head for this sort of thing.'

'Sir Archibald would also come in for the bulk of the estate?'

Bowles hesitated. 'I couldn't say as to that with certainty. The land may be tied up to the male line in some such way. But Mr Eliot's personal property – which is what we live on here – would certainly go, as you may imagine, to Miss Belinda.' Bowles was again doubtful; it was apparent that the conversation was of a species contrary to his instinct.

'And Sir Rupert, you say, was disinherited?'

'Yes, Mr Appleby. Rupert – though a most excellent gentleman now, no doubt – was a disappointment, it seems, to his father. Not exactly wild, I think; more getting quietly into serious trouble of a sort I've never thought it my business to enquire about. And finally his father,

that had both the temper and the power to do it, packed him off to some horrid colonial spot on a remittance, and left everything he had control of to his own brother Timmy so that in time, as I say, various unexpected deaths brought in Mr Richard. Rupert was packed off, they say, before he was nineteen, and he was never heard of again until Mr Eliot's books began to make him a wealthy man. On that he turned up and he's been at Rust, off and on, ever since. Vulgarly put, Mr Appleby, he lives on us.'

'And Sir Archibald – is it a good guess that he turned up in just the same way?'

'You couldn't guess better, sir. Sir Archibald presented himself from I don't know where, trusting to this same benevolence of Mr Eliot's and not being disappointed. With even less justification, in a way. For Mr Richard and Sir Rupert had, as I've told you, been brought up together, and Mr Richard now held that which Sir Rupert had been bred to expect as his own. Whereas Sir Archibald was a cousin that Mr Richard had barely met with in all his life before until he turned up with his trunks and – if it's decent to mention it – a pocketful of unpaid bills. Of course I don't mean that Sir Archibald isn't an excellent gentleman too, Mr Appleby. He had misfortunes, I understand, in the mechanical line. His real tastes seem to have been more in the literary way and that, no doubt, has made him an agreeable companion for Mr Eliot. There's a nickname for him in the family: the pontiff, they call him. Which I always understood, Mr Appleby, to be a title of the Pope of Rome. But apparently the first to hear the name dealt in bridges and the like. A very interesting subject, sir, is that of titles.'

'And do you think', asked Appleby, 'that this family history has left what might be called bad blood in the family?'

But at this Bowles withdrew into a shell. 'Really, sir, I think that is a subject to enquire into in the family itself.' He turned round and looked at a clock which had begun to strike on the mantelpiece. 'Ten o'clock, Mr Appleby; dear me.' He paused in this act of decent dismissal, perplexed. 'I could be certain that the clock struck twelve; nothing seems quite in order at Rust these days. If I might venture to give advice, sir, you would do well to try and introduce yourself to the conversation of Mrs Eliot.'

'Of Mrs Eliot?' Appleby was bewildered.

'The widow of Sir Gervase's second son Timothy, Mr Appleby. And an Eliot herself, being Sir Gervase's brother's daughter. She has resided with us at Rust for many years.'

'I don't think I've heard her as much as mentioned.'

'Very likely not, Mr Appleby. We *don't* mention her, if the truth be told. She doesn't come down, sir, and she doesn't commonly receive. A very old lady she is now and inclined, Mr Eliot puts it, to speculative gloom. And a little behind the times, in a manner of speaking. But probably a great one for family history. If you could get her to converse I dare say you would obtain all you want' – Bowles permitted himself a split second's remote merriment – '*quite* all you want. Mrs Eliot has apartments on the upper storey on the Caroline side. I wouldn't venture to take you there myself, sir; Mrs Eliot is never waited on by anybody except Mrs Jenkins. But if you were to go boldly up yourself–'

Appleby wasted no time. A gloomy matriarchal figure inhabiting the attics was on no account to be missed. Resolved to set out without a guide, he took a somewhat abrupt leave of Bowles, who appeared at once to give himself to a puzzled contemplation of his clock.

Gerald Winter, feeling that he was without skill in spying among servants, was beguiling the morning by spying among the guests. Partly because he really wanted to know, and partly because the endeavour gave scope for mild verbal exercise, he had set himself to find out who had been paired with whom in the particular form of hide-and-seek that had been going forward while the Renoir was being stolen. Appleby had put a finger at once on the odd fact that the thing had happened when everybody had been keeping an eye on somebody else; and he had erred, it seemed to Winter, in not going pertinaciously after this point at once. Presuming that the tricks were not the work of an outsider or a servant, a thorough enquiry into the conduct of the game must inevitably lead to a sifting out of suspects. And the difficulties were technical. There was no formal police enquiry going on; Mr Eliot's guests were vague, noisy, numerous, and drifting; the task of interrogating them was therefore formidable. Perhaps because of the way in which Timmy had brought him down, Winter felt himself to be in some species of competition with the professional detective; to be first in the discovery of the joker who was disturbing the peace of Rust would afford him very considerable gratification. And he had a further and disinterested motive for research. He had decided, as Appleby had done, that a Mr Eliot who was not after all to be downed by shades

might very conceivably come to be attacked in more tangible ways. And Mr Eliot, he felt, having revealed himself as harmless and amusing, must be preserved.

Archie Eliot alone had not been paired. When everyone else was hiding the exigencies of the game had left him free to roam the house alone as hunter. But he had not, in fact, hunted. He had been drugged.

Winter meditated this; meditated drugs in general; was visited by an odd thought – and went in search of Miss Cavey. Miss Cavey had been hiding with Mr Eliot. Mr Eliot had made a little joke of the fact that Miss Cavey's conversation on the occasion had passed entirely from his mind.

Miss Cavey had retired with her writing materials to a conservatory, in which she was discovered sitting between tiers of electric radiators. Her eye, as Winter approached, suspended itself absently some inches above his head; it was to be conjectured that she was once more in communion with her muse. He was distrustfully received. Sir Archie and the little André between them had made her chary of friendly overtures.

'I hope', said Winter, 'that all this wretched business is not upsetting your writing. That seems to me the really important thing.'

Miss Cavey showed provisional gratification. But she had been led up the garden before now, and she had tests which she applied. 'Thank you,' she said; 'I am getting along not badly. But I admit that it is disturbing. One needs, above all things, *quiet*.' Miss Cavey dropped her voice solemnly at the conclusion of this sentence as if

she were invoking the very spirit of stillness. 'And I have not worked under such disturbed conditions since I was writing *Frenzied May*. Those last chapters of *Frenzied May*.' Miss Cavey looked at Winter in frank expectation.

It was stiff fence. For all Winter knew May might be a human rather than a climatic phenomenon – conceivably an overwrought heroine. 'You were disturbed while writing the end of *Frenzied May*? How surprising that is! It seems to me to show such utter concentration; to be even more powerful than the conclusion of the previous book.'

'Than *April Apples*? You really think so?'

'I do. And I consider them both' – Winter now had a fragment of light to exploit – 'as pioneer works in the building up of the seasonal novel. And the seasonal is the novel of the future. The chronicle novel, the period novel, the regional novel: all these have had their day. The future, my dear Miss Cavey, is with *you*.'

This abrupt creation of a new literary kind was completely and almost embarrassingly successful. More searching enquiries were dispensed with. Miss Cavey laid a fat and cordial hand on Winter's. 'How much', she said, 'you will enjoy *This Sour September*!'

Oddly enough, it was *This Sour September* that Winter wanted to hear about. He glanced covertly at his wrist-watch and disposed himself to listen. The cardinal point would be whether Miss Cavey, while expatiating on her present travails and triumphs, had the habit of expecting comment or interjection.

'The keynote', said Miss Cavey, 'is going to be *depth*.' She produced the last word in a deep

ventriloquial growl. 'In my previous books I have been concerned mainly with *breadth*' – Miss Cavey contrived along expiration which conjured up the vistas of *War and Peace* or the uncertain horizons of *The Brothers Karamazov* – 'and now I am turning to *depth*. And first I have to ask: What is *depth*?' Miss Cavey paused interrogatively and for a moment Winter supposed that she did expect occasional murmurs from her auditory. But she proceeded at once to answer her own question. 'I take the view that *depth* is only another function of *breadth*.' She searched the air for words which would touch this difficult conception to luminousness. 'I maintain that it is largely a matter of how one *feels*.' Miss Cavey's voice rose trembling into some sphere of pure sensation. The effect was so successful that she remorselessly repeated it. 'Of how,' said Miss Cavey tensely, 'One *feels*.'

Winter felt bad. He had a professional uneasiness in the presence of muzzy minds. Reminding himself, however, that the woman had vitality and talent enough in her own line, he contrived to sit tight... Miss Cavey talked for eight and a half minutes.

So that was that – and now there was a further point to be investigated. Miss Cavey had got to her difficulties in the critical matter of the puppies; Winter seized the moment to assume a less passive part in the conversation. 'You are confronted', he said, 'with a fascinating problem. But I suppose that only a fellow craftsman could offer you any helpful suggestion.'

Miss Cavey received this proposition dubiously. 'A fellow artist *might* help. But I find that true inspiration comes from the great shades of the past. Sometimes' – Miss Cavey was very solemn

– ‘I seem to *feel* the spirit of Emily Brontë standing at my side.’

What, thought Winter suppressing a too-obvious shudder, one will suffer in a good cause. He made an impressed and respectful noise and cast about in his mind anew. One gambit had failed, he would try it turned inside-out. ‘I suppose’, he said, ‘that you are often embarrassed by people offering you unsolicited advice? It must be very irritating to have the true vein troubled in that way.’

This was much better. ‘Every sincere and conscientious artist’, agreed Miss Cavey, ‘has to deal tactfully with well-meant but obtuse suggestions.’

‘Particularly, I imagine, from other writers of an inferior order? Our worthy host, now’ – Winter plunged blandly into the most outrageous taste – ‘does he endeavour to put in a helpful word? He mentioned that last night you were telling him about *This Sour September* while you were hiding together. Had he any suggestions to make?’

‘Mr Eliot? No, I can’t say he had.’ Miss Cavey reflected. ‘I think he was really very understanding. He listened most attentively, without uttering a sound.’

Winter sighed; the account dovetailed with Mr Eliot’s neatly enough. ‘I mustn’t’, he said, ‘stop another moment. It would be terrible to get in Emily Brontë’s light.’

He was gone. Miss Cavey looked after him with an expression of dawning suspicion. The conservatory clock – a cuckoo-clock – began to call to her derisively. It called twelve times.

Appleby had come to what was undoubtedly a Caroline staircase. So he climbed. He climbed with no plan of campaign in his head; in such peculiarly hazardous adventures it is best to trust to inspiration. But he recapitulated the family situation as he had received it from Bowles. The venerable person whom he was proposing to visit was the widow of a certain Timothy Eliot and the mother of three sons – all of whom were dead and out of the picture. This Timothy's elder brother had been the Sir Herbert who had disinherited his son, the present Sir Rupert. His younger brothers had been the fathers of Mr Eliot and Archie Eliot respectively. And this old lady, his widow, had lived at Rust for some time – perhaps even when Rupert and Mr Eliot were boys there together. At least she had command of the family history. She took a dark view.

Meditating this summary, Appleby found himself on a landing than which Mrs Eliot's vision itself could not be gloomier. A raftered ceiling, dimly discerned, assured him that he could climb no farther; somewhere close at hand must be the lady's retreat. There were branching corridors, each fading into darkness before him. He decided to venture on turning on a light – only to conclude, after some seconds spent in vain search for a switch, that the elaborate electrical installation of Rust had not penetrated to this remote eyrie. He went halfway down one corridor and listened, with some hope that he might come upon that Mrs Jenkins who had been mentioned by Bowles and succeed in persuading her to introduce him into the presence of her mistress. Hearing nothing, he went farther down the corridor, chose a door at random, and listened at that. The career of police detective has its moments of inconvenience and embarrassment:

Appleby had just stooped to listen carefully when the surface of the door receded from before his nose and he was confronted by Rupert Eliot. The voice of Rupert Eliot, harsh and querulous, said: 'Who the devil are you? Are you one of my cousin's guests, or have you come about the drains?

'The former, I'm afraid.'

Rupert, who perhaps thought that the giver of a response so well judged as this deserved scrutiny, stepped back out of the light and recognized Appleby. 'Damn it, sir – I suppose you've been spying on me? A pretty pass when we have to be protected at Rust by sneakers and snoopers. Come in, man, and have a good look round.' He made way for Appleby to enter. 'Please don't think that I mean to be offensive. As a man of the world you'll know I don't speak personally. And I may tell you at once I'd prefer a squad of constables to half their number of Richard's cattle. You *are* a policeman, aren't you?'

'Oh, decidedly.'

Rupert cleared a chair of a variety of small tools – the room appeared to be a species of workshop. 'Sit down.' He leant his lanky but not ungraceful form against a bench and glanced a shade defiantly at his visitor. 'I can't say you quite come within my experience. And I don't mind telling you that I've had experience of the police in more countries than one.'

'You are interested in criminology, Sir Rupert?'

Rupert gave a bark – the sort of noise, it occurred to Appleby, that choleric baronets are conventionally supposed to make. 'Criminology? I leave that to my cousin. I've led an active life, Mr Appleby; I've tumbled about the world. I've

rubbed shoulders, damn it, with cattle enough. Have you ever been set to chip out a boiler in the tropics, Mr Appleby, with a buck nigger working against you on the other side?’

‘No.’

‘It’s what’s apt to happen, you know, if one has a gentleman’s accent and a pauper’s purse.’

‘No doubt.’ Appleby contemplated Rupert in the dubious light with interest. ‘My own modest tumblings have convinced me that the world is brutal and brutalizing enough. I wonder how you feel about Rust? Is it port after stormy seas? Or is it just dull?’

Leaning sideways on the bench, Rupert picked up a tiny screwdriver and began to fiddle with it. ‘Yes,’ he said; ‘you’re something outside my knowledge. The higher snoopery. I never knew a policeman who could ask impertinent questions in that damned confident well-bred way.’ He gave a curiously wolfish grin. ‘I’m not at all sure I think you a good idea.’

‘Then you’re like Peter Holme, who distrusts me because he thinks I may clear up this mystery. He wants it to remain mysterious – seemingly for deplorably selfish reasons of his own.’

Rupert looked sharply up. ‘They’ve all got axes to grind, man. I don’t trust one of them.’ He lounged to his feet. ‘I’m an active person myself, and I’ve been doing a little useful work – in your wake. I like to be contriving something and leaving others to chatter. That was a smart repair of yours last night, but I doubt its lasting long and so I’ve patched up something a little more robust. We shall have an electrician over from Warter on Monday.’ He picked up and displayed a

serviceable makeshift for the damaged switch-lever. 'But that's by the way. As I was saying, I don't trust any of them. I suspected some piece of elaborate and insolent mischief from the first.'

'From the first?'

'When that disgusting woman was burgled. I was in Scotland at the time, staying with old Lorry Macleod. But I came back at the double. They're an incompetent lot here, you know, and I thought they'd better have somebody who knows what's what. Not that it was any good, for my cousin won't listen to reason. He's been seeming readier' – again Rupert gave his wicked grin – 'to listen to lunacy lately.'

'I understand that Mr Eliot is now taking a very objective view of the matter, Sir Rupert.'

Rupert glowered – with a franker malice, Appleby thought, than he had yet shown. 'If he didn't take every view in turn he wouldn't be Richard. But my point is that these damned, intrusive scribbler and mountebanks can't be watched too carefully, and I don't mind telling you that I'm uneasy.'

'You interest me.' Appleby got up and moved across the room as if idly inspecting its workshop equipment. He turned round and caught Rupert in a better light. 'Do you mean, by any chance, that you apprehend something more serious than a continuation of these harassing jokes?'

'I've been in tight places, Mr Appleby – damned tight places.' Rupert paused, and Appleby wondered if by any chance he felt himself in such a strait predicament now. 'I have a nose for danger. And I tell you I don't like it. This scoundrelism has something behind it. It's working up to something. We're none of us safe,

if you ask me. Do you know the little bouncer they call André? Do you know that he's André lord-knows-what? What the devil can one expect with such rag-tag company?' Rupert's remarks seemed for the moment to be dissolving into a vague and hectoring snobbery. Then he added more precisely, 'I didn't like his talk this morning. I've lived in cellars and I can smell a rat when it's stirring.'

'I envy you.' Appleby looked thoughtfully at Rupert. 'I mean, of course, from a strictly professional point of view.'

Rupert lounged nearer. 'Young man, keep your back-chat for the scribblers. And when I've told you about this André you can go about your business. He came to me this morning with some piece of foolery he's getting up for tonight. An elaborate mumming, apparently. After what has been happening nothing could be in worse taste; one would think they might at least let the party fade out quietly. But it has a tradition of fatuous revelry and this little beast is determined to put it through. I expect he gets a commission from Wedge. And I hope there's no more to it than that.'

'Just what a sort of revelry did he propose, Sir Rupert?'

'Something based on one of my cousin's books. He talked me silly about it, apparently expecting me to lend a hand. I listened as civilly as I could: he's a guest here, after all. Whatever it is, in my opinion it's something to keep an eye on. And now I recommend you to be off on your hunting again.' Rupert looked at Appleby with momentary veiled calculation. 'I'd be inclined to try the other corridor if I were you. You might get quite a lot of information. I'll leave you to find your own way.'

I've a lot of work on hand.' And Rupert, in whom Appleby had been noting an interesting predilection for the first personal pronoun, vanished into the corridor about his own affairs.

A curious episode, which had drifted into being unsought. Of all the dark views taken of the Spider's party Sir Rupert Eliot's seemed to be the darkest; the still-elusive Mrs Timothy Eliot, if her own atrabilious vision was to maintain its sovereign character as described by Bowles, had a notable rival to overgo. Appleby wondered if Rupert, like this cousin Archie, combined with his austere social disapproval of the Spider's rackety party a tendency to unamiable pranks of his own.

The corridor was gloomier than before; Appleby walked to the end and looked through a dormer window. Directly below him a small formal garden presented its bleak winter decency to an overcast sky; beyond, a long brick wall hinted delusively at the sun. To the west a fleck of light was climbing laboriously up a knoll in the park; it faded while it climbed, as if the effort had overtaxed its slender resources. The fate of the day had been decided by an army of leaden clouds marching from the south. Presently it was going once more to rain and rain.

Appleby moved cautiously along the farther corridor, noticing anew that this part of the house must rely on candles or oil lamps. There was still no sign of Mrs Jenkins; he saw nothing for it but the boldest exploration, and pausing before a likely door he knocked. It was a knock which he might have felt on reflection a shade too positively allied to an injunction to open in the name of the law; perhaps the long empty corridor gave it unexpected resonance. The answer was

prompt. A harsh voice from within said, 'Who the devil is that?' With the fleeting impression that Rupert had slipped ahead and was playing him a trick, Appleby pushed upon the door and walked in.

The room faced a little courtyard to the north and was even gloomier than the corridor; a lamp was burning on a table near a low fire. From the shadows beyond a tall figure – undoubtedly female – rose and approached him with an upraised stick. 'How dare you, sir,' said the harsh voice, 'intrude upon the privacy of a gentlewoman?' The female form, for a moment revealed as that of a handsome old lady with a beard, became a threatening bulk between Appleby and the oil lamp. 'God bless my soul!' said the gentlewoman with continued unexpectedness. 'To secure a decent seclusion must I resort to fisticuffs?'

Appleby looked at the heavy ebony stick and decided that the situation required address. 'Madam,' he said loudly, 'do not be alarmed. The danger is abated. The fire has been got under control.'

This mendacious statement was successful to an unexpected degree. Mrs Timothy Eliot halted and her gruff voice took on the warmth which one accords to a bearer of good news. 'A fire,' she said; 'there has been a fire?' She half turned round and called towards some inner apartment, 'Jenkins, it has happened. Did I not warn Sir Herbert of the folly of it? A pretty fool he'll look now! Young man, you say the danger is over?'

'Yes, madam.' From the fact that Sir Herbert Eliot must have been beyond the reach of folly a good thirty years Appleby made a rapid guess at the extent to which this ancient but vigorous

person was behind the times. 'It began in the stables. The horses, however, have all been got out, and now the fire is virtually extinguished. There is a distinct smell of smoke in the room' – Appleby believed in efficient detail 'but it need not cause you any uneasiness.'

Mrs Eliot sniffed. 'Jenkins,' she said, 'open the doors and a couple of windows to the north; it will clear the air. As for you, young man, I don't know who you are. But you may sit down. Jenkins – confound that woman! – Jenkins, the luncheon cake and a decanter of port wine.'

Appleby sat down on a straight-backed chair and regarded his new hostess with justified apprehension. His tenure, outrageously secured, was more than tenuous. He was momentarily established in her retreat, but not at all in the character of an enquirer into departed family affairs.

The port wine was handed with ceremony – a capital port which suggested that Mr Eliot's benevolence extended to sending the best in his cellar to this half-forgotten outpost of Rust. Mrs Eliot sipped and suddenly chuckled. Appleby was again startled by the impression that he was in the presence of Rupert: Mrs Eliot, he remembered, was an Eliot by blood as well as marriage. The old lady sipped and chuckled anew. 'Fire,' she said with great appreciation. 'Is my brother-in-law, Sir Herbert, by any chance injured?'

'Sir Herbert is quite undisturbed.'

'Ah.' Mrs Eliot was frankly disappointed. 'But it will be a lesson to him not to disregard the advice of the men who know. He *would* dabble with electrical devices for obtaining light. When I have

repeatedly told him that my uncle Rupert has had it from Mr Faraday himself that the invention is distinctly dangerous in any domestic application.'

'Mr Faraday?'

'Mr Michael Faraday, a projector of such things. My uncle Rupert has always been interested in the progress of natural science. He has more than once been privileged to discuss the subject with the prince.'

'The prince?'

Mrs Eliot frowned. 'Young man, are you a foreigner? I refer to the husband of our dear queen. My uncle Rupert is also interested in poetry. He is said to have been instrumental in obtaining the poet laureateship for dear Mr Tennyson when old Mr Wordsworth died. I may say that I myself do *not* remember poor Mr Wordsworth. He died in the year in which I was born. Mr Faraday, however' – Mrs Eliot's conversation showed some disposition to wander – 'believed that his discovery might one day have its practical uses. A young man in the colonies – I think by the name of Edison – is said to have made some strides that way.'

It seemed to Appleby that Mrs Timothy, if one made allowance for her private chronology, was a well-informed and intelligent person – too intelligent, probably, to believe for long in an imaginary conflagration. So he made a bold avowal. 'Mrs Eliot, there has been no fire. The suggestion was – ah – a joke.'

With great deliberation Mrs Timothy put down her glass. 'Jenkins – damn the woman – Jenkins, close the doors and shut down the windows.' For one who lived perpetually in the twilight of Queen Victoria the old lady allowed herself an oddly

vigorous vocabulary; Appleby was preparing to receive a shattering application of it to himself when he perceived that she was once more chuckling – this time an appreciative and indulgent chuckle. 'I suppose', she said, 'it is another joke of little Rupert's. I wonder why he didn't tell me himself; I'm usually in all his plots; we have great fun together. It gave his father a nasty fright, I'll be bound. Little Rupert is always up to something. He is very like my own dear uncle Rupert in that regard.' Mrs Timothy fell into a muse from which she presently emerged to say with startling suddenness, 'And who the devil are you?' She peered searchingly at her visitor. 'You seem considerably too old to be a playmate of the boys. How dare you, a perfect stranger, come bursting in on me in this way? Jenkins – confound the woman – where is my stick?'

Crisis had disconcertingly repeated itself and seemed to demand renewed prevarication. 'Mrs Eliot,' said Appleby hastily, 'I am the new tutor. Sir Herbert thought it proper that I should come up and introduce myself. My name' – the fragment of veracious statement struck him as peculiarly shameful, but policemen must not be particular – 'is Appleby.'

Old Mrs Eliot abruptly assumed a new and benignantly informative attitude. 'Mr Appleby,' she said, 'it is only fair to tell you that your employer is dishonest.'

'Dear me.'

'It may also be useful to you to know that he drinks.'

'I am very sorry--'

'You will quickly find him to be of a peculiarly mean spirit.'

‘Really–’

‘And his personal cleanliness leaves much to be desired. I hope that you will have a very pleasant sojourn at Rust.’

Mrs Timothy rose, plainly intimating that the interview was over. Appleby, whom this absurd situation rendered momentarily as uncomfortable as if he had been hearing the character of a living and substantial employer, was almost glad to retreat. Bowles had not erred when he indicated this old person’s inclination to take a dark view. And her memories, weirdly enough, were of a period somewhat too remote to be helpful in the investigation. Nevertheless Appleby, rising to take his leave, tried one more shot. ‘I wonder’, he asked, ‘if you have any advice to give me with regard to my pupils?’

‘You will find Rupert a delightful little fellow; his father is most unjust to him, simply because he always has some piece of boyish mischief on hand. If you keep much money by you, incidentally, I advise you to lock it up. Rupert sometimes plays at being a thief.’

‘Rupert steals?’

‘He plays at being a thief – a healthy, sportive lad. His cousin Richard I don’t trust. He is a quiet creature, always reading or scribbling or play-acting in a corner – distinctly a morbid temperament; it is surprising that he and a robust fellow like Rupert are such close companions. Richard is mild and I detest mildness. It is to be hoped–’

Mrs Eliot, who had taken it upon herself to see her visitor to the door, unaccountably paused, and Appleby had leisure to reflect that this otherwise intelligent old lady took a distinctly

prejudiced view of her nephews. It was clear that Rupert –

Appleby's mind halted in its turn. A clock was striking in some inner room. And Mrs Eliot, as she opened the door, showed that a large vagueness on the centuries was not incompatible with an exact grasp on the hours. 'Jenkins,' she called, 'how dare you, you impertinent wretch, interfere with that clock? You didn't? Stuff and nonsense! Did you ever hear it strike twelve before when it was only eleven?'

'A dull day,' said Wedge. 'You must come and look us up some time in Gordon Square.'

Winter, gazing absently over the countryside through the legs of grandfather Richard's bull, amused himself by guessing at the connexion between these observations. Wedge's house in Gordon Square could hardly be other than decently dull itself in exterior appearance, but no doubt it was all glorious within. It would be bright – at least the party rooms – with a brightness that renewed itself once or twice a year. Periodically the latest young man in the interior decorating line would be let loose on it; the Brancusis and Mestrovics would come and go like bric-à-brac; a shock-headed world would marvel at the resources of the house of Wedge. 'Yes,' said Winter, concluding these superior conjectures, 'a dull and colourless day.' Urban souls both, they started before them with eyes unsuspecting of their own insufficiency. 'I sometimes think', continued Winter, 'that Cambridge would have made a different man of me.' He had business with Wedge, but he was in no hurry. 'All that warm brick – I should have mellowed like a peach against a wall.'

Wedge, who did not remember meeting before a don who sighed after peach-bloom, wondered if there might not be in Winter anything between forty and a hundred and fifty pounds. He contemplated his companion with interest.

Twopences and threepences – he was fond of remarking with an amusing illustrative anecdote – do mount up. ‘Peaches?’ he said. His train of thought, through momentary, had been absorbing and he had forgotten just how the fruit came in.

‘Consider’, said Winter, pushing on with his own reflections, ‘the grisaille monotony of Oxford. Cinereous colleges, ashen churches, and nowadays a number of miscellaneous ecclesiastical edifices which are precisely the colour of mud. A Gothic sprawling from slate through neutral to dun; watered by glaucous rills, haunted by leaden vapours, and canopied by livid, lowering, low-toned clouds. When I look over the city I sometimes feel I could take it up and squeeze it till it gushed red like a fig at the fissure.’

Wedge took cautious soundings. ‘Have you ever thought’, he asked, ‘of writing these impressions down?’

‘And if we are to speak thus of Oxford what words have we left for the grey and dismal core of urban England? Thrice happy, my dear sir’ – and Winter nodded fleetingly to an Appleby who had just strolled up – ‘the Nero with a modern technique; the Nero who has thermite to assist his labours before sitting down to compose a rhapsody on the Pleasures of Pyromania! To make the soot-swathed slums to kiss the ground, the grimy factories to fall apart amid a leaping of scarlet and gold and vermilion–’

‘You sound’, Appleby managed to interpolate, ‘as if you were waiting to be fed. Have you met Kermode? He talks just like that when hungry – only perhaps a dash less style.’

'And finally' – Winter was evidently determined not to have his concoction truncated – 'oneself to combust last of all, burning with a hard gem-like flame... How well, my dear Appleby, you understand the springs of human motive.' He glanced at his watch.

Wedge plunged. 'Would you', he asked, 'consider a contract?'

'A contract? Do you want me to turn novelist?'

'Oh no; not necessarily anything of that sort.' Wedge appeared anxious to deprecate any offensive suggestion. 'Memoirs, perhaps. Anything conveying the notion of scholarly relaxation. Dust-wrapper of yourself against a background of nicely tooled books. And I would advise dictation; it captures the natural speaking voice. I could get you–'

Winter was shaking his head. 'I am no writer,' he said, 'and I have the grace to know it. Pray, my dear Wedge, against such enlightenment spreading – it would mean that those machines of yours would indeed stop dead.'

Wedge sighed. 'And all you would need is a dictaphone. It seems a great pity.'

Winter caressed grandfather Richard's bull. 'Our friend', he said to Appleby, 'possesses unslumbering machines that call constantly for food. He prowls in their interest. He would even take his hungry presses poetry if you could guarantee a Wordsworthian output. By day and night he prowls. He gets you in the dark corner and wishes authorship on you.'

Under this extravagant raillery Wedge amiably grinned; being accustomed in the way of business to suffer conversation a great deal

odder than Winter's he was not at all put off. 'A man must live,' he said. 'And – as Winter now knows – a machine must turn.'

'At any hour of the twenty-four', proceeded Winter, 'he is more likely to be going after a manuscript than not. Name any hour and I'll bet you five shillings he was hard at work. We'll trust him to be umpire.'

'A quarter to twelve last night,' said Appleby. He was amused. Winter's manoeuvring for position had been quite wantonly elaborate. But amateurs can afford to fool about.

'Wedge shook his head evasively. 'A quarter to twelve last night? How am I to remember amid all this whirl of gaiety just what I was doing then?'

'I can tell you, approximately.' Winter's voice was slightly bored, as if the silliness of his bet had presented itself to him and irked him. 'You were hiding in a cupboard with a person unknown – quite the place to stick somebody for a book. Who was it?'

'Peter Holme.' Wedge turned to Appleby. 'Do you always take round an apprentice like this?' He smiled happily at Winter's discomfiture. 'Holme will swear to me as I to him. We were practically hugging each other all the time. Holme chose me out himself. He's nervous of being put in the dark with matrons or even misses. Actors have to be so careful, poor dears... Well, well, I expect you'll be wanting to move down your beat.' He strolled away, paused, turned. 'By the way,' he said, 'Winter wins five shillings.' He disappeared into the house.

'After all that rhetorical effort', said Appleby, 'I'm afraid it was a very meagre harvest. Are you

going round the whole household doing this sort of thing?’

Winter seemed as near confusion as a very self-possessed man can get. ‘As a matter of fact, yes. It seems a line.’

‘Bless you, everything’s a line. The art is in choosing the straightest and therefore the quickest. You’re fascinated by the fact that we were all hiding in pairs. Well, why were we? Either because *one* the joker is Archie or some other odd person who wasn’t hiding, or *two* the joker had some trick which enabled him to give his partner the slip, or *three* two paired people were in collusion. Your line, in fact, is one to fall back on if several others fail. I think myself that the best line is the telegraph line.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘But – as we’re on the topic – whom were *you* paired with?’

‘The little translator fellow, André. He chattered steadily and I made decent responses. As Kermode likes to say, you’ve got nothing on me... By the way’ – Winter’s transition was deliberately abrupt – ‘did you know that Chown goes in for medical hypnotism?’

Appleby made exaggeratedly round eyes. ‘If your mind doesn’t run on sinister lines!’

‘It sounds absurd, no doubt. But I have Chown in my head as a sinister influence – perhaps because Belinda appears to regard him that way. Have you read *The Moonstone*?’

Perplexity and merriment might have been discerned as struggling on Appleby’s features. ‘*The Moonstone*? I remember some Indians who practice hypnotism. But I don’t see – ’

'Or alternatively', said Winter, 'drugs. The chief point of the story is that under the influence of a drug a man may do things utterly alien to his own nature and remember nothing about it afterwards. Well, Archie Eliot was drugged, and it has occurred to me that Eliot himself may have been drugged too – and done lord knows what. I've discovered that he mayn't have been in that linen cupboard with Miss Cavey for more than a minute at each end; she admits she talked herself oblivious of his presence.'

'And the hypnotism?'

'That' – Winter looked slightly uncomfortable – 'is just an alternative I thought of afterwards when I remembered about Chown and his technique. Subjects of a certain type can be made to do the most extraordinary things under hypnotic influence.'

Appleby contemplated his apprentice with the frankest of grins. 'If we don't keep on making progress!' He stared out over the landscape; turned back with a sudden and startling seriousness. 'Yes,' he said soberly; 'we make progress.'

Winter looked at him sharply. 'While I've been messing round with bookish notions you have hunted down the vital finger-print?'

Appleby shook his head absently. 'No fingerprints,' he said. 'You're as old-fashioned as the man who monkeyed with the Renoir. And often no hunting down. Have you ever talked to crack newspapermen? They'll tell you that the big things come not through hunting but simply through carrying round a certain state of mind... You're really interested?'

'Intensely.'

Appleby gave him an almost doubtful glance. 'This curious business is my life,' he said. 'And I'm learning that it isn't the nature of truth really to hide itself. It's there – like something significant but very familiar in a room waiting for one's awareness. *Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum–'*

'Dear man, we have enough of that at Rust.'

Appleby looked at Winter with serious far-away eyes and reiterated:

*'Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?'*

He smiled again, cheerfully friendly. 'Quotation', he said, 'sometimes does pin it down.'

Obscure irritation rose in Winter. 'Wise policemanly passiveness,' he said. 'Who would have thought of that one?'

Again Appleby smiled, unsettled. 'It's true, though, and it's what makes the game interesting. You never know where you are. The truth – substantial truth and no mirage – may suddenly rear its exquisite pinnacles from the very deserts of boredom... As I say, we make progress.'

'I'm glad. I've been here twenty-four hours and I see nothing but a mess.' Winter spoke with sudden unhappy sincerity. 'What exactly is the progress we make?'

'Not the brute temporal sort.' Appleby skipped deftly to evasion. 'Somebody is conducting an

experiment with time. The Rust clocks are not behaving well. Some have insisted on striking twelve at ten and eleven. The latest of the incidental sound-effects. Others have hurried on to twelve and stopped there. *Murder at Midnight*, you know.'

'Rather what Faust wanted.' Winter straightened up, suddenly excited. 'But, man! – doesn't that mean considerable technical skill?'

'Something like knowing which cog to eliminate, I should suppose – knowledge which might be arrived at by experiment. Rupert has dangled a screwdriver before my nose in a workroom – Archie's workroom really, as it turns out. Eliot himself is spasmodically mechanically-minded. Overall has confided to Mrs Moule that he has the loveliest electric railway in an attic at home. When you went excavating in Arabia you mugged up and took charge of the chronometers.'

Winter felt within himself a sudden nervous jerk – what storytellers have in mind, no doubt, when they speak of a man jumping. 'And you advertise yourself', he said bitterly, 'as sitting on his old grey stone, dreaming your time away.'

'Routine, you know. Telegraph wires, telephone wires – and knowing the likely people to tap.' Appleby's smile, it struck Winter, was controlled in rather a businesslike way. It faded now. '*Murder at Midnight*,' he repeated. 'Like the clocks, this thing must stop. Whenever you have another thought like that about *The Moonstone*, bring it along. Every little helps.'

Winter opened his mouth to reply, paused, gaped down the terrace. 'Approaching you', he said, 'are our host; his *bête noire* Mrs Birdwire;

my *bête noire* Dr Bussenschutt; and a presence that can be none other than Jasper Shoon himself, *amator sacrosanctae antiquitatis*. Incidentally, I quite forgot to use your damned telegraph wires to reply to a civil invitation from him. It is much, much too much. Officer, farewell.' He vanished with discreet haste through a window.

Appleby turned round. 'Come you in peace', he murmured, 'or come you in war?' He strode confidently towards the approaching party.

Confidences and ignorance are often children of one birth. As he progressed down the terrace he became aware of expressions of wonder and consternation on the faces of Mr Eliot's new guests. These grew; Appleby, considerably taken aback, was conjecturing what sudden and mortifying change could have taken place in his own appearance when he heard an incredible but unmistakable noise behind him. He turned round. Absurdly on Mr Eliot's unpretending but decorous terrace, catastrophically towards the august party before him, he was leading a drove of sizable black pigs.

Even as footmen are unready to grapple with ladies who suddenly reveal themselves as the raw material of art, so policemen – however impeccably trained – may be at momentary loss when incontinently transmogrified into swineherds on the terraces of country houses. Appleby stopped in his tracks. Nor did the wisest passiveness reveal to him that he was contemplating the prologue to grotesque tragedy.

The party came up. Mr Eliot was the first to speak – a Mr Eliot who would have been familiar to Winter but whose acquaintance Appleby had not yet made. 'This', he said, 'is a curious but far

from unfortunate circumstance. You can meet at once some of the most important inhabitants of Rust. My dear Mr Shoon' – he looked at the great man with diffident gaiety – 'are you by any chance interested in middle blacks? Our herd is not without points of interest.'

Mr Shoon, who was old and silver-grey and in bearing distinguished to a point quite beyond probability, stood his ground as if to be surrounded by pigs was the first thing he had expected at Rust Hall. 'I cherish them,' he said without extravagance, 'as I cherish every diminishing remnant of better times. The middle black, like the native squirrel which the imported varieties are chasing so remorselessly from our woods, has surely some title to our antiquarian regard.' With great elegance Mr Shoon applied an ivory walking stick to the task of scratching the nearest middle-black back. 'Dr Bussenschutt, do you not agree with me?'

Dr Bussenschutt was clearly uncertain as to what degree of seriousness or levity the unexpected encounter called for. 'I am afraid', he said, 'that all ungulate non-ruminant mammals are one to me.' He edged nervously from a routing snout and appeared to consider that he had dipped too far towards facetiousness. 'But I congratulate you, my master' – he had no doubts as to Appleby's role – 'on your attractive charges. To an unskilled eye at least they seem to be in – ah – capital fleece.' He made a wary attempt to emulate the caressing tactic of Mr Shoon. Appleby, remembering a fragment of Horace which bore on pigs, repeated it in the sort of accent that philologists classify as Received Standard. Dr Bussenschutt, further at a loss, frowned severely, cleared his throat and fired

something back in Greek. The pigs, seemingly intrigued by their novel environment, supplied an Aristophanic chorus. The situation was eminently absurd.

And it was Mrs Birdwire's turn. Mrs Birdwire, a large red woman, gave the nearest pig a vigorous kick – the action might be called swinish, Appleby philosophically reflected – and raised an equally vigorous voice. The point about Mrs Birdwire was immediately clear: she was of those who believe it feasible to be unfriendly and familiar, rude and jolly – all these in one. 'Dirty brutes,' cried Mrs Birdwire impossibly; 'dirty brutes in their domestic degradation!' She turned on Mr Eliot as if he were responsible for debauching the pristine purity of the whole porcine species. 'If only', she said with loud cheerful scorn, 'you could see the magnificent wild pigs of the Tango-Tango!'

'Dear lady,' said Bussenschutt instantly, 'do you remember your glorious boar hunt there on Good Friday?'

Appleby, dismissing the pigs as inessential properties, looked curiously at Gerald Winter's colleague-in-chief. The pigs were loudly absurd – but it is the little things that are really odd. And his eye went from Bussenschutt to Shoon. The eminent antiquarian – or *curioso* as Patricia said he preferred to be called – had clearly been pained at the cruelty of Mrs Birdwire's act; he was going so far as to lean forward and scratch the ear of the offended pig with a lavender-coloured glove. 'Lovely creatures!' he said. He glanced at the terrace and then at Mr Eliot with a charming mischief that seemed to emphasize the appallingness of Mrs Birdwire. 'Even', he added with quaint learning, 'if shade ectopic in their present situation.' Mr Shoon glanced benignantly

round – humane, cultivated, important, and quite definitely in command.

There was a pause during which it was only too evident that Mrs Birdwire was preparing some major act of self-expression. Only the middle blacks were moderately comfortable; they stood in little groups, absorbed in tilting their flat snouts to various experimental angles, as if their life's work was composing tiny arabesques in air. Mr Eliot, though in robustly rural mood, was plainly harassed; he introduced Appleby and there was another pause in which it seemed almost appropriate that he should introduce the pigs. Or apologize for them. But Mr Eliot, Appleby noted with interest, made no apologies; he was almost firm. 'We have a large and gay party this weekend,' he said, 'and amusing things keep happening. You are sure you will not lunch with us?... You must at least come in and take a glass of sherry.'

They began to thread their way though the pigs. But in the act Mrs Birdwire found what she wanted to say. 'And do the loathsome friends your wretched poppycock collects about you', she demanded, 'think it amusing to pester perfect strangers in the small hours? What is it, anyway? Another publicity stunt like that red paint?' Mrs Birdwire spoke not in anger but according to her own private canon of permissible banter – a method, she plainly considered, which licensed all atrocity.

Mr Shoon intervened with urbanity and force. 'A large party? You must not let us inconvenience you. At moment we are a large party at the Abbey too. The summer school' – he glanced about him at the chilly landscape – 'the winter school, I should say, of the Friends. The Friends

of the Venerable Bede. They have been so kind as to honour their president by meeting under his roof. Dr Bussenschutt is going to address us – and tomorrow you shall all pay us a visit.’ Mr Shoon, unfolding these mysteries and making this statement, surveyed the gathering with such bland authority that Mrs Birdwire was silenced and even the middle blacks might be imagined to pay heed.

‘The Collection’, said Mr Shoon, ‘I shall introduce with confidence to you all; it is largely’ – he bowed gracefully to Mr Eliot – ‘in the keeping of our host’s charming and able daughter. Of Miss Eliot and’ – he bowed to Appleby, showing in the process that he lost little – ‘of Mr Appleby’s equally talented sister.’ He paused, confident of momentary silence: he was accustomed to overpower. ‘The Cabinet of Curiosities’, he said, ‘may, I fear, be beneath the severity of scholarship’ – his bow went this time to Bussenschutt – ‘but it may afford the ladies amusement for an idle quarter of an hour. And if all else fails’ – he turned to Mr Eliot with a playfulness which implied that his host, despite his rural humour and curious literary pursuits, was a reputed scholar too – ‘if all else fails I can trust my Tamworths to win the heart of the owner’ – his ivory stick swept over the grunting middle blacks – ‘of these dear, dear fellows who have so charmingly turned out to welcome us.’

As an exit line it could hardly have been bettered; the procession, with the exception of Appleby, swept on to the house. Appleby stayed outside, contemplated the middle blacks, took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. As he did so he became aware of Mr Eliot, who had made a momentary dive back to him.

'Those pigs,' he said; 'whoever did it hasn't loosed the whole herd.'

Appleby surveyed the wandering creatures. 'At a guess', he said, 'I should say there are twelve.'

'Nothing', said Mr Eliot, 'is more likely.' He gave Appleby a glance of lucid and placid intelligence and was gone.

Gerald Winter, with memories of former comparative security, had removed himself to the billiard-room. It was tenanted only by Belinda and Timmy – but proved to be something of a storm-centre nevertheless. The brother and sister were not precisely quarrelling; they were however at cross-purposes, and palpably engaged in getting on one another's nerves. It occurred to Winter that for the moment they had obscurely exchanged roles. Belinda was inclined to be airy and ironical; it was to be guessed that she was enormously relieved by the happy if obscure turn achieved that morning in her father's mental processes. Timmy, on the other hand, had turned petulant and subterraneously dangerous; he was on the verge, indeed, of being furiously angry.

'I don't see', Belinda was saying, 'that it really matters very much. Daddy's got the size of it, and that's the main thing.' She gave Winter a glance that tacitly admitted him to the conversation. 'As long as poor Mr Toplady isn't worried again it will all pass off bearably enough.'

Timmy, sprawled by a window attempting to read, snapped his book shut: it was a volume, Winter noted with mild astonishment, prescribed for study in *Litteris Humanioribus* in the University of Oxford. 'For goodness sake', he

cried, 'give over about that awful Hugo once and for all.'

Belinda opened wondering eyes and turned to Winter. 'You don't happen to know if Timmy has been taking to drink?'

'Neither to wine', said Winter, 'not to song.' He smiled blandly at his scowling and infuriated pupil. So many Timmys – in his favourite phrase – had passed beneath his bridges with the same fated eddies and darts that his interest in the spiritual progress of any one specimen was severely moderate. Patricia came and Hugo went: it was the order of things in an adolescent world. 'The plan' – Winter turned to Belinda and amused himself by deliberate broadness – 'was yours, after all.' He shook his head. 'Always a plan or two going at Rust.'

Timmy scrambled to his feet. 'I could wring', he said, 'that blasted little André's neck. Plans, indeed! If he's capable of putting what he did across the Cavey he's capable of putting anything across anybody.' He appealed to Winter. 'Do you know what he and Archie were up to this morning? They invented what is certainly a pack of lies about this beastly *Murder at Midnight*, and persuaded the rabbity woman that when the book comes alive she will certainly be the victim. She got such a shock' – Timmy rose for a moment to an almost inspired violence of phrase – 'that she's probably upstairs now, spawning her flaccid fictions before her time.'

Winter looked at his pupil seriously. 'Timmy,' he said, 'don't tell me that you don't find that funny?' He turned to Belinda and shook a solemnly significant head.

'And do you know what plan André's hatching now? He's preparing some show for tonight. I believe he's really been concocting it for days, and that it will be elaborate as well as disgusting.'

Belinda contrived to look bored. 'No doubt', she said, 'it's lowering. But I don't see we need bother so much. As I say, the one important point is whether the joker turns violent before he's caught. And I think John will look after that.'

'And do you know', asked Timmy, who was pale and apparently incapable of proceeding except by means of rhetorical questions, 'just *what* he is getting up? Do you know what he told me?'

Winter sat down resignedly. 'I plead', he said, 'for quiet and sustained narrative. There is to be some sort of theatrical performance?'

'There certainly is. And its theme – '

The billiard-room door opened, as it always did. There entered – of all impossible couples, thought Winter – Hugo Toplady and Patricia. Belinda looked for a moment as if sisterly regard would dispose her to throw some raft or spar to her brother. Winter, who felt that luncheon was still far off and entertainment necessary, cut quickly in. 'Timmy', he said, 'is just about to tell us André's plans for this evening. There is to be a theatrical performance, and its theme–' He made a gesture as if tossing back to Timmy an invisible ball.

Timmy achieved an appearance of desperate calm. 'André took it upon himself to tell me that under the circumstances a burlesque of the crime-and-detection stuff would be in bad taste... In bad taste!' Timmy paused, looked warily at Patricia, sulkily at his sister. 'Lord, lord, *lord*.'

'Well,' said Belinda reasonably, 'its rather a stuffy way of putting it, but I suppose he's not exactly wrong. Whatever's biting you?'

'Yes,' said Patricia, 'whatever is?' Her instinct in such situations, Winter reflected, was as yet uncertain.

Timmy shied, looked despairingly at door and windows. 'Oh, nothing. Just that he is putting on some foolery all the same.' He fidgeted with a stray piece of billiard chalk, glanced up at remorselessly expectant faces. 'André is arranging a sort of fantasia on the romantic element in the books.'

Belinda stood up briskly. 'I see. Well, let's not meet foolery half-way.'

'The romantic element, Timmy? Toplady raised his eyebrows in solid and fatal inquiry. 'I understood the books to be romances through and through?'

'Luv,' said Timmy with inexpressible violence; 'ruddy luv. "Henry," she faltered, "you know I love you, but we cannot marry until this cloud is removed from my father's name."'

There was a moment's baffled silence. Then Patricia with perfect simplicity laughed. 'Do your father's books', she asked, 'run to that sort of thing? I didn't know.'

Winter sighed – for the frailty of his own sex. There are whole tracts of tommy rot, he told himself, which women just cut out. Aloud he said, 'Luv – an awful theme indeed.' But Patricia continued amused. He felt the irritation of a motorist who toots restrainedly and in vain.

And Timmy – fantastic to what crannies the tiresome Spider could reach – was hurt.

Wallowing in new and beautiful sensations, which had Patricia as their centre, thought Winter, he was outraged that, even remotely, his wallow should be mocked. And nobody minded – least of all the girl. Only Winter – indeed because his knowledge was objective, theoretical, and drawn from the best printed sources – fully saw the point. Or Winter and, presumably, André. Likely enough, the evening's entertainment was not to be like this at all; likely enough André was simply playing up Timmy as he and Archie had played up Miss Cavey. It was ingenious and – thought Winter glancing at Timmy again – unkind; it was also liable to be immediately embarrassing if not controlled. 'I don't know', he said, 'if your father will want any sort of elaborate entertainment tonight? The party might do better to set to and repair the clocks. I suppose you know that they've been striking what must be called a definitely sinister note.'

This nicely phrased diversion was unsuccessful. 'Eleanor,' said Timmy at once – Webster's Dictionary seemed to lie open before him at its most appalling page – 'can you hear those happy bells? I want to tell you that they find an echo in my heart.' He gave his companions a horrid and masochistic grin.

Belinda felt it necessary to explain. 'I don't think', she said prosaically, 'that daddy was ever much interested in that sort of thing. But when his circulation grew he felt it fair to the expectations of his readers to put it in. His luv's very old-fashioned, and quite unreal at that, but we're told it's a great success. There's always a hero and heroine, and a conflict between love and duty develops after about thirty thousand

words. I think daddy got the formula from Corneille.'

'All', chimed in Timmy, 'on the nicest plane. Nothing physical until just after that last chapter.'

Toplady was looking disapproving; Patricia, faintly puzzled. Winter said dismissively, 'And we're to have Henry and Eleanor tonight? Well, it might be worse, after all. Henry and Eleanor might come alive on us too.'

'As a matter of fact', said Appleby's voice from the door, 'they have.'

They all swung round.

'Mrs Birdwire', said Appleby, 'has come – in interesting company – to complain. Or rather not to complain. As dear Lucy Pike says, she says, she is *not* that sort of person. She has come rather to exult in insult, slapping heartily round at all available backs meanwhile. Mrs Birdwire has been receiving amatory excerpts from the books – a little old-fashioned in phrasing, as Belinda says. Irritating, no doubt, to a woman of that robust temper. Victorian *erotica* murmured over the telephone at dead of night. Incidentally a vile woman, one agrees. Out there on the terrace I thought how nice it would be to be able to summon Circe.'

'Circe?' said Winter, bewildered.

'Circe Aeae, that knowing dame. But that's another story and connected with pigs.'

Once more perambulating a dripping terrace with Appleby, Winter paused and looked at his watch. This action, prompted by his stomach, brought his mind sharply to something else. 'Timing,' he said. 'The joker has pace. Timmy falls in love with your sister overnight; Henry and

Eleanor immediately begin to stir. The thing has subtlety and speed combined. Timmy becomes vulnerable and Timmy is at once attacked. And you were right in prophesying that the plot would ramify.'

'Plots don't ramify; they thicken.' Appleby stopped in his tracks. 'This plot thickens. To an improbable, fatiguing and almost Eliotic-Spideresque degree. I suspect – I admit it's only suspicion – that so far we've been going round the side-shows. The main entertainment is elsewhere.'

There was a pause. Appleby produced and filled a pipe, lit it, puffed – all with the deliberation which hinted at a lurking dramatic sense. 'Tell me', he said – and tossed a match-box into the air – 'what you can' – the box fell and he caught it – 'about Bussenschutt and the Birdwire.'

'About *what?*' Winter's eyes opened wide.

'Before these people went away a few minutes ago I got an outline of how they hang together. Bussenschutt is stopping with Shoon, apparently for the first time. On his way to the Abbey yesterday he called on the Birdwire, again for the first time. He showed himself – if one is to believe the lady – a devoted student of her works. And this morning he persuaded Shoon to call there with him. They all came on here; Shoon to issue his grand invitation for tomorrow and the Birdwire to bawl her indignant pleasantries. And it's true that Bussenschutt is losing no opportunity of saying an admiring and knowledgeable word on the Birdwire travels. I'm asking you what's the meaning of it.'

'I've no notion; something, presumably, that is entirely not our pigeon.' Winter stopped, stared. 'The smart, laborious old devil!'

Appleby grinned delightedly. 'There,' he said. 'Something clicks. Tell me.'

'You're welcome. It's the padding – the under-plot. Or what I was calling to myself yesterday the subsidiary mystery.' He chuckled. 'And it's Bussenschutt through and through... Have you ever heard of my colleague Horace Benton?'

'Yes.' Once more Appleby's match-box made a voyage in air. 'He used to sell illicit small-arms in the Near East.'

'*What!*' Winter had sprung to his feet as if at an electrical discharge.

'For Shoon. In fact he was a Friend of the Venerable Bede.'

They looked at each other.

'I wish', said Winter dully, 'I knew Shoon. I wish I knew Shoon. Benton said that. Little Benton.' He glanced up in sudden utter doubt. 'I don't know much about Benton's *curriculum vitae*. He was elected to one of our Fellowships before I was. But he must have an orthodox and unimpeachable academic record. How could he be in an arms racket?... And – heaven help us – how far is all this from Eliot and his absurd Spider!'

Appleby was grinning like a child. 'The hopeful apprentice', he said, 'never loses his head. Keep calm. Soon it will all analyse out. I see, to begin with, that you don't know about the Friends. Jasper Shoon isn't a devoted *curioso* just for nothing. This society he runs – the Friends of the Venerable Bede – is supposed to do lord knows what; search European archives, I think, for

matter bearing on English antiquities. It employs a few genuine scholars – the stupider and less observant the better – but in the main it's a neat organization for running about doing and selling mischief. Your friend Benton was in on both wings.'

Winter shook his head. 'I shall enjoy', he said dryly, 'watching you analyse it out. I see only hopeless muddle. If this stuff you're springing on me takes the centre of the picture – and there seems to be only your instinct for that – we're into another world. We've been looking for some sneaking domestic or professional enemy of Eliot's. You've just assured me that this deplorable domestic persecution is beginning to ramify to other members of the family – as it does seem to be doing in this petty but subtle baiting of Timmy innamorato. And now, because I mention a dim and scared person called Benton you take a jump at roaring gun-running melodrama. It's not sense.' Winter made an impatient gesture. 'It defies the unities. If Eliot were concocting all this for his public he wouldn't look at it.'

'Tell me' – Appleby reiterated and amplified – 'about Bussenschutt, Benton, Shoon, and the Birdwire.'

Winter reflected.

'The night before last I had to get Timmy his exeat to come down here. That involved Benton's permission. In the common-room Bussenschutt mentioned that he was coming down to see Shoon and be shown a papyrus. That led to a manuscript of Benton's which he had found in the Levant. And that gave me a chance to mention the Birdwire and her being burgled; I wanted to explain why Timmy felt he should go home.

Benton was thrown into an inexplicable flurry at the good lady's name and Bussenschutt, who misses nothing, was intrigued. One of his milder employments is persecuting Benton as he can. He must have decided that the Birdwire had something on Benton and being, as I say, laborious, must have proceeded to nail her. I invite you to link up these facts with, say, the statement that this is Folly Hall.'

'I think', said Appleby placidly, 'that we might get ready for luncheon.'

Winter remembered that he was hungry and heaved himself out of his chair. Presumably Appleby must be believed: nevertheless he could still hear Benton's murmur, 'I wish I knew Shoon.' He was – and shortly after his rash arrival at Rust he had felt forebodings of it – sadly out of his depth. He thought of his laborious examinations of Miss Cavey and Wedge and cursed himself for a meddlesome fool. To his understanding of the bothersome and possibly sinister affair of the Spider he had added, as a result of this expedition, just nothing at all.

Nothing. Winer, the amateur in opposition, looked at Appleby and suddenly felt clumsy and tired – involved in futility. And a familiar futility: in just this situation, surely, he had found himself long ago...

'I've got it!'

Appleby stared in astonishment.

'The crux of the whole thing. The joker's ability to peer into Eliot's mind. I've' – Winter was abruptly cautious – 'seen a possible solution.'

'If you've done that we may pack up to go home. Solve that and the mystery fades into the

light of common day.'

'Yes,' said Winter, 'Wordsworth too.'

'What?'

'You've just quoted Wordsworth. And my explanation explains Wordsworth too. *And* Plato.'

The professional Appleby was looking pleasingly puzzled. 'I'll be abundantly satisfied', he said, 'with an explanation of Eliot.'

'It's not so much an explaining as an explaining away. But I think it must be the truth. And it came to me, really, before I had been ten minutes at Rust.'

'Dear me.'

Winter looked a shade uncertainly at his companion. 'It's in the nature of the thing that the evidences exist only in Eliot's own mind – the evidences, I mean, of the joker's clairvoyance. The secretary who was killed in that air crash could have corroborated the fact of the manuscripts' having been tampered with, but the clairvoyance-theme is entirely a matter of Eliot's own belief. And Eliot is mistaken. Paramnesia.'

'Ah.'

'The feeling that this has happened before. It is at the bottom of doctrines of reincarnation, of the Platonic theory of Reminiscence, of natural mysticism like Wordsworth's... And it came on me here yesterday as I sat down to luncheon. *This has happened before.*'

'And had it?'

'Of course not. There must be a simple psychological explanation. And the best suggestion is, I believe, Havelock Ellis'. The mind is like a two-storey house; above, the sense-

impressions of the moment; below, memory. Only sometimes sense-impressions tumble straight downstairs without our being aware of their reception. They tumble *straight* into the memory. And a moment later – while virtually the same sense-impressions are being received in the normal way – they rise up *with the quality of memories* and jostle with what is actually happening about us. The result is the uncanny feeling that what is confronting us now has confronted us before.'

'A most lucid explanation of a common phenomenon.'

'It's a phenomenon to which some people are more susceptible than others. I suggest that Eliot is peculiarly subject to paramnesia. A situation confronts him and he is suddenly convinced that—'

'My dear Winter, that *what?*'

'That it has occurred before – in his own mind.'

'Exactly. *In his own mind*. The qualification seems to me to be important. If it's paramnesia it's a special case of the phenomenon. He doesn't think: *this has happened before*. He thinks: *this once existed as a project in my own mind*. He believes that something which he remembers as a fantasy is now actualizing itself. Whether the mechanisms of paramnesia would cover that I rather doubt. Your suggestion' – Appleby looked thoughtfully at Winter – 'is quite first-class all the same.'

'Thanks. It might be put to Chown.'

'Certainly there is matter to put to Chown.' Appleby said.

Nearly everyone knew that Miss Cavey had had an Experience. Shortly after her conversation with Winter she had walked into the hamlet of Rust and there a man had hanged her a couple of puppies for half-a-crown. Miss Cavey balanced an eager and eloquent account of this proceeding by eating a decently abstinent luncheon. She added water to claret which was not that sort of claret at all, and over an omelette specially prepared without the kidneys reiterated her tale to whosoever would listen.

Miss Cavey, who like all imaginative persons courted the desire rather than the reality, had not wanted the puppies to be hanged. She had not known that it was this that was in the man's head. He was a young man – the best type of countryman, Miss Cavey said – and she had spoken to him with only the most general notion of professional improvement in mind. Rustics – warm-blooded, slow of speech, and rather vaguely involved with the procession of the seasons – were part of her equipment, and she was conscientious in her field work. Sometimes she sought out the elderly, whom she took to pieces and reassembled on her typewriter against a background of inn parlours and ingle-nooks: the spirit of George Eliot, no doubt, hovering at her side as she tapped. But by preference she frequented the young, subsequently evolving from her notes figures which the curious found interestingly in the tradition of *Lady Chatterley's*

Lover – only with the words to which the circulating libraries so prudishly object left out. It was in pursuit of contacts in this direction that Miss Cavey had solicited the conversation of this particular young man. It had been a friendly and finally confidential conversation, and in the course of it – as was inevitable – she had spoken of the problem at present confronting her. The young man had asked her to climb up a ladder and into a barn. Miss Cavey climbed. It had, she explained, begun to rain.

The young man, Miss Cavey thought afterwards, must have been spoilt by urban contacts. The barn achieved, he went away at once and returned with the two puppies, a length of rope and a hook of the sort on which butchers hang meat. One puppy he strung up on a noose and the other he impaled on the hook: fortunately something vital was pierced and the creature died almost at once. But it was messy and Miss Cavey felt ill; so ill – and this was the irony of it – that she could recall nothing of the noises of the puppies, and had thus undergone a harrowing experience in vain. She had tried to escape, but the downward trip on the ladder was something which she could not, in her distressed condition, face unassisted. The half-crown appeared to have been a sort of ransom money.

Miss Cavey spoke, unconvincingly, of a resolution to inform the police.

This deplorable incident – Gerald Winter reflected – is just the sort of inconsequential thing that really does happen. For life has no need of the unities. The yokel appears, without significant cause; arbitrarily, he indulges his gruesome freak; he vanishes again into the shades, his

action writ in water. Within a week the Cavey and the world have forgotten him: yet another thing has happened that will never, never do for art.

Winter turned from these barren reflections to his friend Mrs Moule, and noticed that she was again eating meringue. 'That', he said obscurely, 'is art.'

'Art, Mr Winter?'

'Meringue, a tolerably crowded twenty-four hours, once more meringue. Because our mind acknowledges pattern, that is the type of everything we invent.'

'And what we actually experience?'

'What we *would* experience is easier. Meringue, meringue, meringue. But we seldom get it. Consider Miss Cavey and how she has had thistles and sea holly all day. Refined malice, if rumour be true, at breakfast, followed by rustic malice instead of elevenses. This house stuffs with malice, we know. But it seems a little hard that it should exude from the neighbouring countryside as well.'

'It's an aura,' said Mrs Moule.

'Yes, I didn't think of that. These twenty-four hours have converted me to all your opinions.'

Mrs Moule did not trouble to look suspicious. 'You know', she said, 'I'm not gullible – not even when tackled on my hobbyhorse. Sir Rupert's malice now, didn't catch me at all.'

'Sir Rupert's malice?'

'During that tiresome – Dear Belinda! I think she has more colour today... During that tiresome hiding game. We were paired. He took me up to

some dreadfully dark place – a secret passage, I believe – and pretended to be a ghost.'

'Dear me. I understood Rupert to be very correct. It sounds much more like Archie. What sort of ghost?'

'Rather' – Mrs Moule blushed – 'rather a *fresh* ghost.'

'Oh!' Detection, the apprentice was learning, had its embarrassments.

'And at the same time... well, *ghostly*. I was really very confused, and a *teeny* bit scared... I believe that is why the odd business of Sir Archie went out of my head. I am wondering if I might venture to speak to that nice Mr Appleby about it.'

'Speak about it', said Winter emphatically, 'to me.'

Mrs Moule devoted a moment to meditation. 'It's curious how one can look back on a scene and remember seeing something one doesn't remember noticing seeing at the time... Oh, dear' – Mrs Moule shook her form-mistressly head – 'how *very* badly expressed!'

'On the contrary, your remark is perfectly lucid.'

Mrs Moule smiled gratefully. 'That *is* said to be the grand test of style, isn't it... It was just before we came in to luncheon and I was thinking about the strange business of Sir Archibald having been drugged. Dr Chown seemed quite positive about it, and I'm sure so eminent a person couldn't be mistaken. And yet it is so strange. One sees *why* he was drugged – or one thinks one does. He was the odd man out, prowling the house, and he had to be eliminated so that the Renoir could safely

be stolen. Not' – Mrs Moule faintly flushed – 'that it was stolen, quite.'

'Could safely be monkeyed with.'

'That' – Mrs Moule returned compliments – 'is a very good way of putting it... So we see, or *think* we see, *why* Sir Archibald was drugged. But *how* was he drugged?'

'Plenty of drinks going round all the time.'

'Yes, but there would be so very little time in which to drug *him*. It was the odd person out who had to be drugged; not just Sir Archibald anyway. Everybody was off to hide a minute after Sir Archibald was chosen... Do you know anything about drugs?'

The question was accompanied by a glance so suddenly severe that Winter was startled. 'Singularly little,' he replied.

'Mr Eliot and I have had occasion to study them together. And it occurred to me that if Sir Archibald were really drugged in order that the picture might be stolen there and then it would almost be necessary to jab a needle into him; not, you know, just drop something into his glass. A drug in his glass – unless it was really dangerous – would begin to act about the time that Chown noticed something wrong.'

'I see.'

'So when you come to look at it closely there are difficulties all round. It was only when I came to consider them like this that I remembered that I had *seen* what really happened. Sir Archibald drugged himself.'

Winter stared. 'Dear Lady, you take this very calmly. Do you realize that you have Scotland Yard on the run?'

Unexpectedly Mrs Moule chuckled. 'Mr Eliot and I have been having Scotland Yard on the run for years – on paper at least. So I suppose it's no novelty... Sir Rupert and I, as it happened, were the last out of the room. As we were going out Sir Archie walked over to the drinks and said, "Better have another spot before squaring up to this" – meaning before he started in as hunter. By the time he had poured himself something I had the closing door between myself and him. And Sir Rupert was already outside; he had gone first because he was going to hunt for a wrap of mine. Only Sir Rupert happened to say, "Are you sure you haven't left it there?" and so I looked back and caught a glimpse of Sir Archibald in a mirror. He was looking about him' – Mrs Moule considered, summoned her professional vocabulary to her aid – 'furtively. And then he dropped something into his glass. As I say, Sir Rupert is to blame that such a curious circumstance slipped my mind. I'm afraid it *looks* as if Sir Archie was responsible for all these annoying incidents.'

'Come, come – what about that aura?'

'I think' – Mrs Moule was not at all at a loss – 'it must be a case of possession. After all, why *should* Sir Archie behave in such an uncomfortable way – even if they do make fun of him as that engineer? In a way I'm rather relieved. Sir Archie may be a little venomous, but I don't think he's likely to do anything really violent or fatal.'

Winter was unable not to pounce on this. 'But if it's possession–'

'It has been found', said Mrs Moule competently, 'that in cases of possession there is

commonly temperamental *rapprochement* between the spirits and their chosen instrument.'

This proposition Winter felt unable to dispute. He glanced down the table. The chosen instrument, rotund and placid, was murmuring into the ear of his crony André.

Appleby, finishing his coffee in the company of Belinda Eliot, sensed in himself obscure to topographical discomfort. He had set out the evening before for Rust Hall, and Rust Hall now spread its physical framework around him. But in his mind it was growing oddly insubstantial; if he closed his eyes he could almost see it – a sort of dissolving view – fading into the less mellow textures of Shoon Abbey. Appleby, who controlled considerable imagination in the interest of his calling, had a weakness for the big guns, and the big guns – in every sense – were at the Abbey; they hinted that the alarms at the Hall were very much an agitation of small fry. Here a popular writer was being persecuted by disgruntled rivals or resentful relations; there, armoured within his ferro-concrete extravagance or perambulating his expensively symbolical ruins, the cultivated Mr Shoon was contriving his modest but profitable international frictions. Appleby reminded himself that the big guns were in the bush whereas the small fry were in hand – or on his hands: he had undertaken to sort them out. More teasingly, he reminded himself that the two were obscurely involved with one another...

'Belinda,' he said, 'was your father ever in the Near East?'

Belinda opened her eyes wide beneath her bumpy forehead. 'He was stationed there for a bit

right at the end of his army career – when he was in the military intelligence. But he fell ill and was invalided home. He's never said much about it; I have an idea that the illness was severe and rather affected his memory. It was quite before my time, so I'm pretty vague on it anyway. I'm almost sure he's never been there at any other period.'

'What about Rupert and Archie? Have they ever been in the Near East – and could either of them have been there at the same time as your father?'

'I don't know. There is a veil – probably blessed – over much of their lives. But wait a minute. Yes, I do know something about Rupert.' Belinda calculated rapidly. 'As I say, I'm not an eye-witness. But I do know that Rupert can't have been in the Near East at the same time as daddy. You see, he was in gaol.'

'That does seem conclusive. And I'm sorry to stir up the skeletons. Just one further question: does your father know a Horace Benton – now a colleague of Winter's?'

'Timmy's moral tutor? He's called on him at Oxford as a matter of politeness. I'm almost sure they'd never met before. You're being frightfully mysterious.'

'It's things that are mysterious; not me. When you got your job with Shoon: was that because your father and he had been associated in any way?'

'A favour to a pal? Distinctly not.' Belinda was momentarily indignant. 'They'd met in a dim county way; nothing more. Daddy's never been to the Abbey. He says it would remind him of Wembley or a sort of Luna Park. Tomorrow,

though, you'll watch him being impressed by the Collection.' She smiled at herself cheerfully... 'As questions are going: do you keep Patricia at the Abbey as a spy?'

'No,' said Appleby very seriously. 'I do not.'

They were silent for a moment as a fragment of the party drifted past. 'But you really are being mysterious, John. I don't at all see how Jasper and the Spider business connect up.' Belinda conveyed that this defect of vision was tiresome indeed.

'No more do I. Your Jasper, like the unregenerate Spider, sits at the centre of a web. But that's hardly helpful. By the way, have you found Blake or Lawrence yet?'

'Have I *what*?'

'Found a real genius to mother amid all your father's cheap friends.'

'Lord, lord, *lord*.' Belinda was dismayed rather than indignant. 'Did I talk like that? I must have been het up.'

'If you want a tip, I should go for Kermode; he has an original mind. But the question is, are we all to be het up again? The clocks have sounded a sort of warning gong, but people are being rather slow to move. Notice how much it depends on your father. Because he was jumpy yesterday everybody was ready to be stampeded at once. The clarinet and what-not had it all their own way. There was an obscure but general feeling that it was coming to us. Now, because he has contrived some sort of masterly retreat on the pigs, the tone of the party is more robust. A retiring man, your father; but he must have what Mrs Moule calls an aura – a powerful one. Can we

all be rattled again before tonight? The joker's resources must be getting a bit low, and he is taking cumulative risks. Have you heard about the middle blacks? Like the writing on the architrave, that was a big risk for the sake of something merely stylish. If he goes on like that he'll simply be *seen*.' Appleby frowned across the living-room at the Renoir, now restored to the wall. 'So what next?'

'There's activity out on the drive, if that's any good.' Belinda was looking out of the window and through sheeting rain. Appleby turned round and followed her glance. The panes were fluid as a windscreen in a cloudburst; nothing could be distinguished but a moving cream blur. Belinda pushed open the window and their faces were splashed with raindrops. They could see Mr Eliot's largest car drawn to a halt and the chauffeur, dogged for ritual, climb out and open a door. A small figure, ulstered and in a tweed cap so large that it looked half-brother to a fantastic umbrella, ran down the steps and jumped in. 'André,' said Belinda. 'I wonder if he can have been called back to town.'

'If he's departing it's not unsped.'

They could see, sheltering on the edge of the terrace and looking after the departing car with the grimmest satisfaction, the figure of Sir Rupert Eliot. 'A minor purge,' interpreted Belinda. 'The squirearchy – if on an inadequate scale – unscums itself. Eight bounders instead of nine.' She snapped the window to. 'As you were saying, what next?'

Appleby turned back into the room and reassuringly smiled. 'No more pinpricks,' he said.

Throughout the afternoon the rain continued to fall – continued to fall as the moment of anniversary approached. Twenty-one years before – and it might be on just such a wet afternoon as this – the printers of Sunday newspapers had been locking up in their formes brief but appreciative notices of the first activities of the Spider. And now the retainers of the Spider were preparing to celebrate; were preparing to celebrate – it might be presumed – the staying power of Mr Richard Eliot. They were going to celebrate as prosperous people, with leisure and floor space and plenty of oddments put away in unwanted rooms, often celebrate domestic occasions in rainy weather. They were going to have theatricals. The word is old-fashioned and was not actually used. But it covered all the fuss of preparation for the evening which was now going forward. They were going to have theatricals in what was almost a real theatre.

Timmy – as if Winter's statement that he had the instinct of showmanship rankled – was taking Patricia over this structure in irony and gloom. The irony was all in Timmy; Patricia was equably interested. The gloom was diffused through the large tank-like apartment in which this amenity of Rust lurked. The theatre had been the innovation of Sir Gervase Eliot, and because of Sir Gervase's straitened circumstances it had an obstinately pinchbeck appearance which a certain amount of random expenditure by Mr Eliot had pointed rather than obscured. Sir Gervase had been mildly stage-struck; his servants had objected to living in a dampish vault hitherto appropriated to them: Sir Gervase had the happy inspiration of transferring them to a dilapidated gunroom and making the vault into a little theatre. He had knocked out the floor – it had come away easily

enough – and thus added to the Cimmerian vault a positively Tartarian cellar. In the resulting cube the theatre had been rigged.

‘Melancholy, indeed,’ said Timmy.

‘But an empty theatre is always melancholy.’

‘Not so melancholy as this.’

‘They explored for some moments in silence. ‘Well,’ said Patricia, ‘if I owned a theatre I would try to look on the bright side of it.’ To soften this sarcasm she added, ‘By the way, what is the bright side?’

Timmy glanced at her suspiciously. ‘Technically? I suppose its height. One doesn’t often get that in a stage just knocked up in a house. But this is two storeys.’ They were on the stage and peered up through a formidable muddle of joists and pulleys to a shadowy ceiling. Almost touching the roof were a few windows of sea-green glass; there was no other daylight. ‘It’s like being deep in an ice-cleft,’ continued Timmy – thus unwittingly reviving in Patricia’s mind the Eliots in their disagreeable character as Barbary apes. ‘But there is this big height above the stage; one can haul whole flats up and out of sight. Not that I suppose they will do anything elaborate tonight’ – from what was to be done it was plain that the young squire was elaborately disengaged – ‘or anything more than messing about with charades and a little play they’ve been giggling over ever since they came. Whether it’s about the luv’ – he carefully repressed the savagery which it was nevertheless plain he would have liked to hurl into the word – ‘or something else in the books it’s pretty sure to be filthy fun.’

'I often think', said Patricia, 'that I don't a bit know how absurd I am. Do you ever feel like that?'

'Patricia – ' The syllables sounded neither outraged nor wounded. They echoed for a moment in the tank with a resonance which was unmistakable; just so, in following the history of Eleanor, does the inner ear hear Henry speak.

'I mean', said Patricia, sudden panic driving her into tumbling speech, 'that a moment ago I was idiotically scared. Just standing on the stage staring up at that mass of stuff. Quite meaningless scare – and it was whole seconds before I realized I was simply being a fool. Your theatre, if you like, *is* melancholy. It gives me the girlish creeps.'

'Oh, I say – I'm frightfully sorry. Silly of me to be so glum.' Timmy was puzzled and anxious. 'Let's cut out of it.' He took a step backwards and completed his own confusion by tripping and falling off the stage.

They sat down on the edge of it, Patricia in charge and making an obscure joke about chamois. 'And about the fun tonight,' she presently said, 'I gather you've got it wrong. There's going to be nothing about the books at all. That was just your André's little jape as with the Cavey.'

Timmy stared at her. 'Nothing about the books? But there's always something about the books. It's a recognized insitution.'

'Well, it's being dropped. With these discomforts your father has been suffering it's thought more civil to drop it out.'

Anger long simmering in Timmy Eliot rose and declared itself – declared itself in language rather impressively free from facile curses. 'I hate this party. I do hate it. It's like their cheek. Letting daddy down nicely. Buckets of consideration. Who are they to decide there are discomforts? A harmless frolic at the bedside I suppose! Nothing upsetting... Lord, lord–'

'*Lord,*' said Patricia. It was absurd and utterly unreasonable. But she found that she liked Timmy better than she had ever done; it was as if his mind had tumbled out and proved to be just like the back of his neck where it emerged above his elegantly untidy collar. She stood up, suddenly dangerous, and glanced round the theatre. 'When I show you the Abbey', she said, 'we shall have much more fun.'

As the afternoon wore on the theatre became increasingly the centre of activity at Rust. Dr Chown's observer, had he been modish enough to play at anthropologizing an unknown culture, would have discerned something of the muddled concentration that goes before totemic ceremony or corroboree. Social consciousness, struggling against the over-developed individual consciousness which the party represented, achieved intermittent and ramshackle organization. People whose energies had hitherto been expended on impressing themselves by soliloquy and disquisition now harassed each other with orders and suggestions. Movement, so far a matter of gesture and of forming and reforming in knots and eddies, became more purposive; in straight lines, or threading themselves through contrary streams like ants, both sexes went to and fro with burdens and

messages. Diffused through the house was the pleasant consciousness that by each his bit was being done. This made it exceedingly difficult for anyone to hold aloof. Winter found himself – on the strength of some acquaintance with the Attic stage – directing in the construction of masks those two young women from Chelsea who had once proposed to paint the Spider on soup tureens and egg-cups. Sir Rupert Eliot was to be seen – amazingly – going about with a contrivance like a small porter's barrow. Sir Archie – whose placidity, unnerving courtesy and power of leisured quotation seemed to grow with the excitement – had bent his professional skill to what looked like preparations for a trapeze act or the descent of a god: Winter found himself hoping that his knowledge of that prosaic branch of engineering known as Strength of Materials would bear him out on this occasion. About tea-time the sense of preparation was intensified by the return of André with four enormous brown paper parcels. And at this point it became plain that the party was less a single organism preparing for ritual than a number of factions preparing for tournament – possibly for almost gladiatorial encounter.

Among a few André's parcels were a whispered triumph; to others mystification which might mean discomfort as well. Appleby, apparently absorbed in tinkering with a switchboard in the wings, was moved to reflect on the brute dimensions of the party; on this and on its hopeless fluidity. There were facets which he could not remember as present the night before; there was an answering absence of faces which had fixed themselves in his memory shortly after his arrival. Mr Eliot's was distinctly not a mystery of the sealed-room type, nor was it even a

mystery with a decently circumscribed *dramatis personae*. Appleby beguiled himself by deciding on the dimmest person present and picked on a nervous young man whose business it was to wander about taking notes for Mr Wedge. The young man appeared sub-acutely aware of the appallingness of his employment, and this gave him a vaguely criminal air: might he not be the lurking joker who was disturbing the peace of Rust?

This was not a method of thinking which could be described as analysing things out. It occurred to Appleby – perhaps because he was bent on an interview with Dr Chown – that it was a species of dream analysis which was required. For again he had the sense that the Spider's party was taking on the quality of dream; it had at once the unreality and the baffling urgency of a dream from which one is just about to wake up. It was partly this dreary and yet obscurely dramatic setting to which Mr Eliot's guests had removed themselves. The high pale panels, chill and flaking; the sea-green light percolating faintly from above; the gloom and the grey tones strangely shot with harsh blacks: all these made a composition which was at once vibrant and repelling, like one of those pictures of the Spanish School in which dwarfish figures, sinisterly employed, are posed in Baroque agitation between imprisoning, blindly towering walls. Or the dream was monstrous – one in which human fish moved in the depths of an aquarium: Sir Archibald Eliot a globular creature formed by nature to anticipate the bathysphere; Miss Cavey, involving herself in a length of green silk, like some giant cod peering with clammy intelligence through the algae. Only the silence of the aquarium was lacking. Nearly everyone was

talking, and talking in an unnaturally brisk and directive manner. It was, Timmy darkly said in passing, like a congeries of lunatics loosed on a quarter-deck.

From somewhere behind the scenes came a series of loud blurred thwacks, as if a child without feeling for tools had taken a hammer to thump an inadequately supported board. Voices were pitched higher by way of reply and Appleby wondered whether in any ear but his own there continued to sound above this din the remembered stroke of clocks untimely tolling twelve. Seeping through Rust the night before had been an anticipation of the untoward, a widely diffused apprehension of malice yet to come. With Mr Eliot's rally the campaign had stumbled; the affair of the clocks had not quite come off with the majority; there was conceivably something like humorous admission of defeat in the final and almost light-hearted episode of the middle blacks. Either all this, thought Appleby – the plot taking the license of dream to dissolve and vanish – either this or the plotter was taking a bold dip into a species of dramatic relief. Or again – and with still more of the inconsequence of sleep – the malice which had hitherto been concentrated in a single unknown had been diffused and watered down amid the company; it was plain that the party was dividing into camps for the purpose of contriving mutual annoyance. It was plain, too, that this made everybody very gay. Miss Cavey had recovered from her misadventures and was preparing to give a little sketch called *A Haworth Saturday Night*. Even Gib Overall was morosely animated. He had discovered some time before that Wedge in his unwary youth had published a volume of poems: he was getting up some of the

nicest of these for sudden and devastating recitation. The party, in fact, was drawing pleasantly to its climax and there seemed only Appleby to wonder what that climax would be.

'Kids,' said a powerful voice in Appleby's ear; 'just kids – the secret's in that. Will you have a doughnut? I pocketed some at tea.' Appleby turned round and discovered that this friendly offer came from Kermode; he was holding out a hand in which three doughnuts nestled like marbles. 'I find them settling after brandy. Have you been drinking, Tommy, old boy? I have.' Kermode nodded a solemn and candid head.

'John,' said Appleby.

'John?' Kermode scowled threateningly round.

'Not Tommy: John.'

Kermode looked puzzled; then his face cleared. 'I get you,' he said. 'How do you do?'

The smell of brandy was unescapable. Appleby fleetingly wondered if it had simply been dabbed on Kermode's lapels; it was impossible to be his sort of policeman and remain simple-minded. He thought Kermode possibly the ablest man at Rust, and abundantly capable of presenting himself as a stage drunk. 'The secret?' he asked. 'It's the secret that they're just kids?'

Kermode nodded. 'If you grow up,' he said, 'you find that the simplest solution's the booze. But if you stick at the age of ginger-pop – well, there's nothing much for it but scribble away.' He surveyed the room, momentarily deflected the passage of a doughnut to his mouth to gesture in the direction of Gerald Winter. 'And that goes for his sort, too; only with him it's chat... Kids. The trouble with me, Jack, old man, is that I'm too

old. Too old at ten; that's the truth about authors. Do you know Wedge's *Gateways of Literature*? The only real gateway is the nursery door. Now mine' – Kermode's gnomes seemed to Appleby full of a covert logic which made it all part of the dream – 'mine's been the tradesman's entrance. You see most from there: valets, the backstairs view. And I tell you they're not an adult profession; nobody employs or consults them – do they? They just shove forward. Juvenile entertainers – they're successful if they're that.'

'Heaven preserve me', said Appleby, 'from that sort of success.'

For a moment Kermode's eyes sought after a memory. 'Kids,' he said, 'but fancying themselves as babes and sucklings. Liking to throw in a spot of prophecy as they perform. Mature societies didn't allow it. They guarded art as mere entertainment by the kids – no little voices piping of the infinite. Aren't I right?' He took a doughnut at a gulp.

'Right', said Appleby, 'as a rivet.'

The doughnut took a plunge down Kermode's gullet. His eyes – the eyes of a perfectly sober or sobered man – narrowed on Appleby; opened again luminously amused. 'The keyhole's the great place for secrets,' he said. 'So long, Jack.'

Appleby watched him across the theatre. The keyhole for secrets; it was the simple and obvious rebuke... But obscurely he felt that in all the chatter at Rust the first thing of consequence had been said.

Hard upon this Appleby had his conversation with Mr Eliot. It was a disturbed conversation, without privacy and punctuated by bumps and

bangs. And because they had repeated to dodge people coming and going about the theatre it took on something of the quality of primitive dance – a vis-à-vis dodging and ducking as of savages miming combat. The setting was Mr Eliot's choice; it was an example of his sense of style – that faintly ironic sense which must get him into trouble, as often as not, in his writing. Mr Eliot was not a big man, like the looming Shoon; nor a powerful man, like the glimpsed Bussenschutt; one could feel him at times as a small man – this perhaps because only a fragment of him was present at once. Certainly he was vital, with as many lives as a cat. He was even – Appleby thought of the thirty-seven books, of Pope, and of the leisured and piggy life of Rust – a shade uncanny if one contemplated him for long. But of this there was no danger at the moment; it was a fugitive, if significant, encounter.

'So we are all', said Mr Eliot, passing and pausing as if only for a moment, 'bound for the Abbey tomorrow. Do you know it? Except for the Collection, which one knows to be really remarkable, I have a lurking feeling that it would all be better blown sky-high.'

Appleby nodded. 'My feelings don't lurk. It would certainly be better in ruins – real ruins.'

'How quickly', said Mr Eliot inconsequently, 'everything is going forward. Wedge, my dear fellow' – the publisher was prowling past – 'they are hatching some plot against you: don't take it ill. And what' – he had turned again to Appleby – 'is going to happen at midnight? Really and truly murder, do you think?'

Appleby looked hard at his host; he appeared to be in genuinely high spirits. 'Heaven forbid,' he

said quietly. 'Another irksome trick, perhaps.'

'I agree with you.' Mr Eliot stepped back to avoid a group of perspiring people who were bringing in a piano. 'It is a most annoying series of jokes.'

'You've given up the idea that it's a sort of raid from another world of your own creating?' Mr Eliot, Appleby rather desperately felt, must somehow be pinned down.

His host nodded with simplicity and conviction. 'I sometimes get such fancies.' He spoke as if in light but genuine apology. 'I'm afraid it worried the children. For a time I was scared and the notion was a sort of refuge.'

This, thought Appleby, might be accurate enough. He waited until somebody had ceased striking chords on the piano and said firmly, 'Scared?'

'My dear John' – though light-hearted, Mr Eliot was not in the least flippant – 'I was *really* scared by certain ideas which were put into my head some time ago by Chown. I have not cared to speak about it to the children, but I know I may talk about it confidentially to Patricia's brother. I was a patient of Chown's for some time. I had become obsessed with the books and couldn't put them out of my head – a matter of overwork. He is a capital fellow really and most competent; he put the matter entirely right. Only' – Mr Eliot looked for a moment as if the scare of which he had spoken was not entirely a matter of the past – 'he rides a hobby, as so many of them do. He has his own favourite explanation of things... Miss Cavey, how much we are all looking forward to Haworth tonight.'

Appleby treated Miss Cavey to what was probably a ferocious glare. He gave a moment to calculation. What he wanted to put to Mr Eliot might be dangerous.

'Chown', he said boldly, 'being interested in split personalities?'

Mr Eliot was unperturbed.

'Exactly. It's very nice, if I may say so, to discuss the matter with an acute mind. It appears – and it came to me with something of a shock – that my books are studied with a good deal of interest by people like Chown. They are interested' – Mr Eliot, standing in the middle of his eddying theatre, was taking on something of the air of subdued showmanship with which he had discoursed on the Birthday Party the night before – '*in me...* Mind your head.'

Not very alertly, Appleby minded his head. A rope and pulley-block had come clattering down from where Archie Eliot was tapping and screwing above the stage, 'You gathered that psychiatrists are interested in you as – as a case?'

'Just that. They are interested in myself and the Spider. It is odd to think of Harley Street and Wimpole Street intriguing themselves with that hoary old automaton.' Mr Eliot gave a smile which might have been either the irony again or ingenuous pride. 'What is likely to happen to a person who spends half a lifetime in the company for a single imaginative creation? That is the question which attracts them. And it appears that there are several schools. Some of Chown's colleagues believe that I and my creature the Spider may finally become integrated in a single stable personality, animating equally myself and

the books. Others declare that I shall become progressively unable to distinguish between my own ego and the more powerful ego I have called into being, and that as a result I must inevitably be destroyed. Nothing, I suppose, but Spider left.'

'Dear me. That looks like another metaphysical problem.'

'No doubt, my dear John. But you must not poke fun at me. I assure you it is really upsetting to discover that one is the subject of speculations of that sort. I am bound to say that Chown himself appears to have met these attempts at prognosis in a soundly sceptical spirit; he seems to have maintained that there is not sufficient evidence for a valid scientific opinion. He would only say – in a very happy phrase, for he is quite a literary fellow – that I was indeed in some measure entangled in my own web. To what issue, time would show.' Mr Eliot's smile was suddenly brilliant. 'And time, he seems to think, has now delivered the goods.'

The piano was strumming persistently and on the stage somebody was tap dancing. Lights had been turned on and the theatre, hitherto faintly mysterious, was one rather shoddy glare. Appleby, although he had so far heard little on which he had not at least briefly meditated, was disturbed. It was partly the effect of the setting again. He supposed that in Mr Eliot's mind the matters under debate were associated with the uneasy privacy of Dr Chown's consulting-room, and that he was deriving satisfaction from airing them in a different environment... The lights snapped off; they were trying out spotlights; a greenish beam swept down on them and threw Mr Eliot into momentary brilliant isolation; Appleby's discomfort grew.

'As I was saying, the split personality is Chown's special field. He once lent me a very fascinating book about it. You must not think that he has ever openly associated me with the subject; nevertheless I have been able at times to read his thoughts. So you will see how very disturbed I was when these odd things began to happen. Such odd things, it seems, *can* happen. One may develop a subsidiary personality *and never be aware either of it or of one's connexion with its operations*. There was a girl – a very orderly girl – who woke up every morning to find her room in frantic confusion and her yesterday's knitting unravelled. It was herself all the time. A personality of whose existence she had no inkling used to get control and say the most awful things to people on trams.'

Appleby chuckled as cheerfully as he could. 'Morton Prince's Miss A? If I remember aright one personality used to baffle another by keeping a diary in a language which only the diarist-personality knew. Something you would never dare to put in a novel. What Aristotle called an improbable possibility.'

Mr Eliot gave fleeting recognition to this literary critical excursus. 'All that sort of thing. So you see how possible it was for me to be alarmed when I connected it with these speculations of the learned on the Spider and myself – with that and these fantastic things which had actually begun to happen. My metaphysical explanation was plainly a way of sidetracking this disturbing possibility. It was only when the picture turned up as it did that I saw both ideas to be ruled out equally. No personality of mine could behave in that way... Holme, my dear chap, don't let them burden you with too much tonight.'

It was distressingly evident that Mr Eliot's new confidence was as tenuous as it was unsound. The Miss A who awoke in her disordered room was likely to have had just the same supra-rational conviction that no personality of hers could do *that*. But this was scarcely a point to put to Mr Eliot: Appleby was about to pass rapidly to something else when his host again took the initiative. 'I don't know if you will understand me when I say that Chown's line of thought was chiefly distressing because it attracted me. It caught my fancy; and my fancy, you know, is like a wrestler's muscles – dangerously over-developed. I found myself supposing the thing to be true and then working out various resulting predicaments, just as I might work out a book. Fascinating – but depressing in the end – particularly when Chown came down again with the evident conviction that I was obscurely play-acting.'

Appleby smiled. 'I don't know if I should mention it, but I believe he consulted Holme.'

'Consulted Holme?' Mr Eliot was startled.

'Chown seems to think' – Appleby had abruptly decided to test Mr Eliot's new confidence out – 'that you are not wholly unconscious of your secondary personality. An awareness of your extraordinary conduct is lurking somewhere on the threshold of your mind. You have a sort of groping understanding of what's happening. As a result, when you profess complete bewilderment about the tricks you are in some degree acting. I believe Chown sought the professional opinion of Holme on the subject.'

'I am sure', said Mr Eliot cheerfully, 'that it is very kind of him to take so much trouble. Have you gathered what Holme's opinion was?'

'At a guess – that you weren't in the least acting.'

'And that made Chown feel-?'

'That – well, that you were more of a case.'

Frankly and boisterously Mr Eliot laughed. 'Rupert, my dear fellow' – his cousin was going past with a pile of chairs on his trolley – 'you look like a *Punch* picture of the propertied classes buckling to in a general strike.' He turned back to Appleby, his face suddenly rueful. 'There, I've said the wrong thing. About the propertied classes. Rupert *hasn't* any property. And I fear that – perfectly reasonably – he is resentful. A good fellow, Rupert. But you have to understand him, of course... What a beautiful mask!' The young woman from Chelsea had come up with a grotesque shell from within which Gib Overall was to give his rendering of Wedge's poems. 'But just a little cruel. I do hope that nobody's feelings are going to be hurt. These foolish jokes may have made people touchy.'

Appleby had an impulse to take Mr Eliot by the shoulders and give him a gentle shake. He was contriving to be irritatingly remote – as remote as an author behind a solidly constructed book. There was about him too the suggestion of some tour de force achieved, as if – again – he were contriving the final chapter of one of his own puzzles. Appleby decided to bring up what artillery he had. 'Folly Hall,' he said. 'A good many people think – and my sister was the first to guess – that Folly Hall was the name you gave to the house in *Murder at Midnight*.'

'Patricia was quite right.'

'How many people knew?'

'Well, anybody *might* know. My manuscripts are always there in the cupboard for anybody to look at. I have always preferred that nobody *should*; and as a matter of fact' – Mr Eliot looked uncomfortable – 'only Archie is in the habit of taking a quiet glance over them, as far as I know. He takes a friendly interest, I suppose, in how things are getting on.' Mr Eliot, determinedly charitable, brightened again as he made this suggestion.

'A murder was to take place in Folly Hall at midnight? Just how?'

Mr Eliot shook an amiable head. 'My dear John, I have no idea. I tore up the manuscript shortly after it began to misbehave, and before I had in the least thought the murder out. I find, you know, that I put off the murders more and more; they haven't quite the old kick – at least not for me.'

'I see. Now, do you mind if we take up the crux of the whole matter – the joker's clairvoyance, or whatever we are to call it? He might have got the name, Folly Hall, from your manuscript. Has he, in fact, shown any awareness of anything which you had projected for *Murder at Midnight* but not actually put down on paper? Anything, I mean, like the knowledge he seems to have had of the unwritten story, *The Birthday Party*?'

'Oh, dear me, yes.' Mr Eliot's placid cheerfulness – slightly reminiscent of Sir Archie – was taking on a mildly infuriating quality. 'Several of the changes which I discovered in the manuscript implied knowledge of ideas I had entertained but abandoned in the Spider's earlier period.'

'Ideas you are certain you never wrote down – not even in a rough note? Ideas you are *certain* you never mentioned in casual conversation; never mentioned to *anybody*?' Appleby, feeling that at any moment Mr Eliot might slip from his grasp, was remorselessly urgent.

'Exactly that. I never discuss my plans for the books with anybody; so many things are better worth talking about.' Mr Eliot smiled in what might so easily – it struck Appleby – be considered his superior amateur way. 'I never even discussed them with my secretary. And I never make notes; no note that I could make would do other than fill me with dismay a week later. Except of course' – Mr Eliot was suddenly wistful – 'my notes on Pope. I really think they are beginning to come together.' Mr Eliot's sigh belied this confidence.

'Ideas', said Appleby carefully, 'sufficiently distinctive not to be mere shots in the dark?'

'Definitely so. Tolerably original ideas come to me, for some reason, readily enough. I assure you it would all be too great a bore if they did not. The ideas the joker showed command of simply come into my head and stay in storage there. When I need them I use them... We must really try to make this theatre a little more attractive for next year. It seems only fair when all these people are good enough to come down.'

'You are familiar' – Appleby fired off Winter's idea – 'with the phenomenon which psychologists call paramnesia?'

'Oh, *that*, I thought of that very early on. It won't at all do.'

Appleby's impulse to shake him became very pronounced indeed. 'And having abandoned

metaphysics and rejected morbid psychology', he said, 'have you *any* explanation of this extraordinary state of affairs?'

Mr Eliot opened his eyes in exaggerated surprise; just such a prep-school trick in Timmy, Appleby reflected, must have infuriated Winter often enough. 'Dear me, yes. I can't think how it escaped me before. It is perfectly simply explained by a scientifically attested fact. Wedges published a book about it only the other day by a Fellow of the Royal Society. What the joker has command of is plainly telepathy. Mind-reading. The thing has been proved... I must really go round and say a civil word to some of these excellent souls.'

And as casually but irresistibly as a piece of pack-ice Mr Eliot broke away. He paused, however, at a couple of paces. 'I *think* the Royal Society,' he said. 'And *virtually* proved.'

Mr Eliot, in fact, did not believe in telepathy and he could be quite as irritating as his son. Yet by this odd interview in the theatre Appleby was finally less irritated than impressed. It was as if Mr Eliot, hitherto amiably shuttlecocked hither and thither, had subtly taken to himself an impetus and an objective of his own. Perhaps it was only his natural resilience once more; perhaps he was simply deriving momentum from the party, now briskly moving towards its crowning fun. But Appleby felt that Mr Eliot's confidence, so unexpectedly begotten by Joseph out of the Renoir, was something other than this. The creator of the Spider, for reasons unknown, had come to feel that he was on his game; that the problematical situation at Rust had fallen under his control. Appleby tried to think of anything besides the history of Belinda's picture which might have contributed to this result. The clocks, the visitors from the Abbey, the pigs; these had been the principal incidents of the day and there was obvious illumination in none of them. Mr Eliot, again, had repudiated with urbanity and lucidity the disturbing convictions of Dr Chown: was he simply the lighter for having disburdened himself of this perilous stuff? Or did he feel that he had thereby turned the flank of what might be substantially the truth?

For more than one reason now, Appleby wanted to tackle Chown. Chown's reading of the situation – even in the sketch of it offered by Mr

Eliot – was at least the most economical and convincing in the field. It was conceivable that Mr Eliot was being pursued by the persistent malice of nobody; it was conceivable that he was persecuting himself. It seemed at first glance an unlikely form of madness, but Appleby knew that in the experience of one like Chown such antics of the bewildered spirit must be common enough. In every asylum there are people whose right hand knows not what their left hand does. Indeed the sanest of us, if his habit be introspective, may sometimes detect strange games of hide-and-seek conducting themselves within the confines of his own personality. Was a Mr Eliot who was doomed to the bin persecuting himself? Or – conceivably – was a perfectly sane Mr Eliot laying obscure foundations for the persecuting of somebody else?

Confronted by this latter question, Appleby found that he had a curious confidence in Mr Eliot's veracity. Or in the veracity, at least, of the familiar Mr Eliot – and there was no real evidence that another existed. His host's belief in telepathy had been distinguishably enough a sport of fancy; nevertheless an instinct for veracity had made him underline the point in an ironical addendum. Appleby believed in the substantial truthfulness of any but a morbid, subliminal, and merely hypothetical Mr Eliot; he also believed, he found, in the essential rationality of the same conscious man. He believed in short – and here was the inescapable point – that Mr Eliot had bewilderingly encountered, both in the adulterated manuscript of *Murder at Midnight* and in last night's incident of the Birthday Party, matter which he had thought of as never having passed the boundaries of his own unspoken and unwritten thought.

Amid all the huddle of incidents at Rust, and amid the advancing shadows of complications which Appleby suspected as yet to come, this single problem stood out clear. If Mr Eliot was speaking not merely what he believed to be the truth but the truth itself – then how could the trick be worked? It was a speculative question. And Appleby found the contemplation of it interfering with a practical duty.

Confident and quizzical, Mr Eliot had revealed himself as in a state of mild exhilaration. And in this Appleby had felt the stir of something known to himself: the sense of danger and the quickened consciousness which follows. Mr Eliot was backing himself to get the whip hand in a tight place.

Murder at Midnight. It was still likely that Patricia had been right; that the situation at Rust was perilous as well as mysterious; and that Mr Eliot was chiefly endangered. Appleby's confidence in this issue was far from absolute; the thing might continue at a level of rather futile malice. But he was at least more confident of the reality of the danger than of Mr Eliot's ability to counter it. The author of thirty-seven mysterious thrills might so easily bank too heavily on what were only a literary resourceful and a theoretical guile. In short, Mr Eliot had to be guarded.

Appleby had become a policeman long before the honourable calling of Dogberry and Verges had entered in England on its gentlemanlike phase. He liked to feel – specialist in a key place though he had become – that the simplicities of his craft remained within his command. He liked to feel that if stood up in a lavender tie to guard a table of wedding-presents those presents would be as safe as in a vault; that if he were employed

as bodyguard to a sinful public person that public person might forget his sins. And he liked to think now that Mr Eliot was safer than he knew. Only the job took more vigilance than a man with an abstract problem could readily spare.

He could never decide whether it was indeed surprising that, with this double task upon him, he remembered so much of what Winter had to say on art.

'Miss Cavey and I', said Winter, 'are endeavouring to define the nature of bad art. And we have thought it necessary to begin with some definition of art itself. It was said by Proust that the pleasure the artist gives is that of enabling us to know another universe. Art is the construction of another universe. I know you will all think it very interesting that Miss Cavey agrees with Proust.'

Winter presumably found the prospect of the approaching revels more tiresome than any number of manifestations by the Spider. He had collected a little audience and was conversing with that air of personal shyness and intellectual audacity which his kind affect. Miss Cavey, who had recovered from her distrust of the morning and who was keyed up to the limelight presently to fall on her in the theatre, nodded with unnerving intensity. 'Yes,' she said with finality, 'Proust is right.'

'Miss Cavey', continued Winter innocently, 'is an authority on our topic, and the debate is all hers. But I would remark that it is easy, following our first definition, to remark what is *not* art. The artist does not enable us to know *this* universe. Documentation is not art; reporting is not art,

however accurate and devoted. Were Miss Cavey herself to return from her studies of the rural temperament and simply transfer her experiences to paper the result would be very far from art. To achieve art, other forces have to come into play.'

'There is', said Miss Cavey, clasping her hands happily over her stomach, 'the *spiritual* side.'

'Exactly,' said Winter – and folded his hands with unobtrusive wickedness in the same way. 'There is the shaping power; the esenoplastic power; the esemplastic power, as the shaky scholarship of Coleridge called it.' At this abysmal professional wallow the audience perceptibly thinned; Appleby, for whom Winter's disquisitions had a curious fascination, was one of those who lingered. 'Our mere experience is not art. And yet, again in the aphorism of Proust, the Muses are the daughters of Memory, and there is no art without recollection. But – and here is the point – *inaccurate* recollection. Miss Cavey recollects her experiences with the rustics, but recollects them – and how thankful we must be! – with the divine inaccuracy of the artist. It is this that makes her books so *rum*, so distinctly unlike anything this universe can offer. And that is the hallmark of art – which we may define, approximately in the words of Wordsworth, as commotion misreclected in tranquillity. Now, *bad* art–'

Appleby sacrificed the opportunity of learning about bad art to a dash after Dr Chown, whom he had noticed in isolation at the other end of the room. From Winter's lecture he departed not uninstructed. Miss Cavey had been baited sufficiently for one day and this added mockery was a little less than decent; it was the product of frayed nerves and prosecuted by someone whose sense of decorum faltered with his sense of

security. One other person at least in the party – and an intelligent one at that – was looking forward with some uneasiness to the onset of night. Appleby guessed that Winter would be talking more persistently at nine than at eight and more wildly at eleven than at ten.

Casually he approached Chown. 'Does the academic mind', he asked – and because Winter had been dominating the room the allusion was clear – 'work most fluently when scared and apprehensive?'

'The intelligence, my dear Mr Appleby, is commonly more fertile when under emotional stir. But different emotional states stimulate specific intellectual responses. Take an acute sense of danger.' Chown, already mellowed by his first glass of Amontillado, was prepared to be affable, instructive, and scarcely less voluble than Winter. 'Our good friend over there is talking nonsense about the divinely inaccurate memory of art. He might more sensibly speak of the miraculously extended memory of funk.'

'The drowning man?'

'Quite so. The notion that a drowning man passes his whole life in review is substantially correct; many instances have been collected of men in acute danger reliving the past with extraordinary intensity and sense of detail. That is an instance of the mind working more fluently – if in a passive mode – when scared. The power of more active thought, however, is stimulated less by apprehension than by anger. In difficult and intricate situations one is commonly urged to keep one's temper. But that is the talk of ignorant schoolmasters; nothing actually could be more fallacious.' Chown eyed Appleby with the benign severity of the man who knows. 'One will always

solve an intellectual problem more readily if one can get really angry over it. This is something we have put through the laboratory. It has been proved.'

Like telepathy, Appleby thought – and let his eye and ear stray to Mr Eliot near by. Mr Eliot was explaining to the unsuccessful Gib Overall that good baconers should have length, depth, and strong backs inclined to be roached. Overall, in his melancholy way, looked distinctly as if he were preparing to adopt Chown's receipt for successful intellectual endeavour. Farther away, Miss Cavey was passing once more from complacency through suspicion to distrust. Consciously and unconsciously, the party was developing its power of annoyance. Feeling that he might take licence from this to deliver a frontal attack, Appleby said abruptly, 'The various hypnotic states – what is their effect on memory?'

Chown indicated by a slight frown his sense that the other's conversation verged on badgering. 'Under hypnotic control we can recover a great deal. Birthdays, for example. Do you remember anything of your tenth birthday?'

'I don't think I remember the circumstances of any birthday before my twenty-first.'

'Quite so – but only because you are in a normal waking state. Under hypnotic influence you could be persuaded to remember something for your twentieth. And then – though the process is uncertain and laborious – we could work back year by year. Memories of a second birthday have been recovered in that way frequently enough, and sometimes memories of a first. Some practitioners of medical hypnotism claim even to have got back to intra-uterine

memories. But that' – Chown shook a responsible and conservative head – 'is disputable.'

'Does the subject continue to remember about the birthdays when he has emerged from the hypnosis? Does he remember anything at all of what has occurred while he has been hypnotized?'

Dr Chown put down his glass. 'My dear sir,' he said with suave finality, 'this is an intricate subject. One day perhaps – if you are really interested – you will let me have the pleasure of recommending a few books.'

'Books, Dr Chown?'

The question, obscurely pregnant, hung for a moment in air – where Chown seemed to contemplate it challengingly. 'There are several,' he said – and with a civil murmur moved away.

Appleby stared for a moment in his own empty glass. It was interesting. Everything – even Gerald Winter on *The Moonstone* or on art – was interesting if one hearkened in the right way. He turned round. Miss Cavey had retired to a corner and was holding a small indignation meeting of supporters. Winter had transferred his attentions to Peter Holme. Kermode, planted in the middle of the room, appeared to be anatomizing his host to Mrs Moule in terms that turned her pale with rage. Timmy Eliot was behaving badly to Toplady: there had been an awful quarrel, it was said, in a cupboard during the fateful game the evening before. On this – and much else – were superimposed the mounting anticipation and the rather uneasy corporate feeling of the party. Only Mr Eliot was a centre of calm. This was simply another of the Spider's parties; many of the guests were the Spider's children; he himself

sustained a benevolent grandfatherly role. Appleby watched and had to fight an unprofitable sense that the Spider – the Spider who had crept from the manuscripts – was in control; that although the clarinet and the stick were silent and no more incidents had occurred the party yet moved to a plan. He glanced at his watch. Exactly twenty-four hours before he had pushed open a window and presented himself in the darkness to these same people eddying about him now. In the interval had he learnt enough? And what had Winter learnt?

Winter – he discovered by recrossing the room – had learnt of Holme's physical exercises; he was making the control of the abdomen the occasion for a sort of anthropological fantasy. The exercises sprang from a widespread philosophical fallacy – the romantic fallacy. Holme tinkered with his tummy because of an irrational belief in the superiority of primitive man; he was attempting to replace a civilized inside by a savage one. At the best it was an illogical half-measure; there was no evidence whatever that primitive man had been healthier than his civilized descendant. It was a different matter, now, with the apes. There was considerable scientific backing for the view that when man first stood upright he gave his physical frame a jar from which it never recovered. In this business of posture and the tummy the motto should be not back to primitive man but back to the lemurs, apes, and opossums. It would look well on the stage; if a modern-dress *Hamlet* why not a simian one? Why not a baboon-like Othello, a spider-monkey of a Spider?

Winter, as Appleby had predicted to himself, was talking more wildly. He was also talking

better; this performance had speed, and the acute, deceptively vacuous Holme was brisker game. Nevertheless, Appleby took Winter by the arm and led him aside. 'My dear man,' he said candidly, 'you won't do. As a vocal turn, yes; as a detective, distinctly not. Come outside.'

They pushed open a window and stepped into the chill darkness of the terrace. For a second they could see nothing; then they simultaneously exclaimed. Nature, so profoundly uninteresting during the past thirty-six hours, had played a spectacular trick. With a speed which was matter for meteorological curiosity the rain had given place to snow, and the snow was beginning to lie on the ground. The terrace under a few scattered lights was like a half-finished Christmas card. 'It seems to me', said Winter, 'all part of the plan. Was Folly Hall surrounded by snow in *Murder at Midnight*? You may bet it was.'

'The plan?' It was as if the word had started an echo.

Winter moved impatiently in the shadows. 'Isn't something going forward? Do you think those clocks stuck and struck for nothing? I wish I'd never come near this corner of England. I'm scared, and being scared is wanton waste of nervous energy.' There was the spurt of a match as he lit a cigarette. 'You and I keep on having conferences. Is it necessary to that progress you're making that we should hold another in a snowstorm?'

'I thought we might exchange ideas. But you certainly are scared; does it always take you in chat? And why just you? The party is all right; it's losing its temper a bit, but not its nerve. I can't see much of last night's jumpiness. Why just you?'

'Perhaps because I've taken it into my head that all this is Eliot himself; something bowled him over and now he's as mad as a hatter. I find it a horrid and haunting thought. Has the possibility struck you?' Winter had gone back to the window and stood framed in faint light.

'Indeed it has – and Eliot too. He's offered me an up-to-date theory of his own imbecility, vetted by Chown. Incidentally I've talked to Chown and been snubbed for my pains. I have to report that I don't see him as holding Eliot in semi-permanent hypnotic thrall. Chown isn't any sort of villain; he's just an out and out man of science.'

Winter laughed apologetically. 'It was a silly theory and I shall think twice before offering another. But I will offer you a fact, or more strictly, Mrs Moule will. It looks' – there was a shade of triumph in his voice – 'like the crucial fact. Would you agree that the man who drugged Archie Eliot last night is the man we're looking for?'

Appleby chuckled. 'At this stage in a puzzle I never agree with anything. Still, it sounds all right.'

'Well then' – Winter was a shade impatient – 'Archie drugged himself. Mrs Moule saw him.'

'It's nice that something's been seen. The cloak of darkness that this joker can take on is beginning to worry me. Oh, excellent Moule.'

'You don't sound very impressed.'

'I'm not.'

Snowflakes were falling between them; a moment's silence was broken querulously by Winter. 'But surely–'

'It doesn't much help.' Appleby's tone was both absent and decisive; it may even have been faintly mocking as well. 'Mrs Moule must look again. So far, I repeat, we've all seen too little.'

'If we stay here we shan't see any dinner.' Winter pitched his cigarette into darkness. 'I wish I could think you are just a mystery-monger. I bring you decisive information; you make enigmatic noises of depreciation; and, sad to say, I am no end impressed.'

'My dear man, don't be impressed by me. Be impressed by the mind behind this foolery.'

'Ought one to be impressed by foolery?' Winter's hunger seemed less keen than his instinct for debate.

'I merely mean that, whatever it's after, it's a good mind. Any mind that can get clean away with a number of manoeuvres, however trivial or perverted, is a mind good in itself. And you yourself suspect a plan.' Once more there was discreet amusement in Appleby's voice. 'I suspect that that's the best bit of suspecting you've done so far.'

'I've merely followed you in that.'

Appleby nodded – soberly once more. 'Yes, there's a plan... Do you read much of Chown's sort of stuff?'

'Very little.' Winter, who had been listening for the chatter that would assure him there had as yet been no summons to dinner, was divided between bewilderment and impatience.

'Have you a psychologist in your college – the learned Benton, for instance?'

'You have a mind like an antelope. We have nothing remotely like a medical psychologist, if

that's what you mean. And certainly not Benton. Incidentally, you're back on all that? Isn't it likely to be a will-o'-the-wisp?'

'Very likely indeed. But Benton was bowled over by a chance mention of the Birdwire burglary and he was in with Shoon and now here is your other acute friend Bussenschutt poking round that whole complex. It's interesting.'

'I agree. But what has Chown's psychology--'

Appleby interrupted with a brisk move indoors. 'When *I* have a wild theory', he said with genial unkindness, 'I sit on it... By the way, what of your investigations into the alibis?'

'Abruptly terminated; the thing's not my line. But I did get to the end of what might be called the principals. Your sister, as you no doubt know, was hiding with Chown. Kermode was with Overall. And Timmy was with Toplady – incidentally, they quarrelled. Timmy asked Toplady to return some poems. Toplady, who doesn't understand being given poems, had handed them on for an opinion to his grandmother, an old lady with literary tastes. Timmy was annoyed.'

Appleby sighed. 'After all,' he said absently, 'this is Folly Hall.' He halted again by the window as if a thought had struck him. '*Murder at Midnight* is torn up. The monkey-tricks upset Eliot so much that he destroyed it. And last night we were guessing that there would be no episode thirty-eight; the thing had got him on the run and the Spider was in liquidation. But now? One rather feels there will be the regular new Spider story in the Spring lists.'

'And a Spider story *by Eliot*,' said Winter. 'Has all this haunting of Rust really been – by a

ghost?’

‘And will the plan fail if Eliot carries on?’

‘Just that. If Kermode–’

‘Don’t forget the Renoir alibi.’

‘If Kermode *and* Overall–’ Winter paused and his face lit up with excitement. ‘Two writers of just this sort of thing,’ he said. ‘May there not be something there? Eliot is bothered because he thinks that private stock-in-trade of his own has been actualizing itself. But aren’t the dodges of all these people strictly limited? With two keen brains – students of the thirty-seven published books – putting their heads together–’ He stopped as he saw Appleby’s smile.

‘Winter, I can’t think why you haven’t published thirty-seven books yourself. You have an extraordinary fertile mind. And talking of minds – doesn’t this latest theory rather under-estimate Eliot’s?’ He’s an able creature.’ Appleby shook his head. ‘An idle, fanciful, slightly irresponsible creature. In fact not at all unlike his son.’ He chuckled. ‘Only Timmy, of course, is a little more grown up.’

They turned to go into the house. As they did so the scene changed. Like the pale face of a diver rising from inky waves, the moon appeared from amid dark clouds to the east. Behind a curtain of gently spiralling snow a whole landscape built itself up uncertainly before them as they looked. The effect was bizarre, momentarily improbable, and powerfully evocative of Mr Eliot’s little theatre with Sir Archie playing tricks with the lights. Appleby surveyed the scene carefully. ‘A bad night for reconnoitring,’ he said.

'Are you going to reconnoitre?'

'No; merely to lurk about the house and see that nobody gets hit on the head.'

They were back in the living-room and the party was eddying and exclaiming around them. 'My dear Appleby', said Winter, 'I have developed something like mild affection for you. Don't get hit on the head yourself.'

In theatrical histories nothing is more forbidding than the cuts which illustrate private performances given before the courts of Europe in their more domestic and exclusive moods. The royal family, disposed in a roughly pyramidal formation and surrounded by respectful vacancy, contemplate the stage as if it were a sort of gigantic fireside: the play can be felt as perishing beneath their gaze. There is something in the condition of drama which demands beyond the footlights at least the convention of a crowd. As Mark Anthony's speech falls flat if the management has failed to pay for the presence – or better the illusion – of a sizable assembly of Romans, so the whole play may fail if the public has declined to pay for a sufficient number of seats. Thus it is that in the conduct of amateur theatricals the main difficulty is in the provision of the necessary audience. Here too nothing is more depressing than no audience at all, or an audience consisting of a single row of elderly or infirm persons, eked out with children kept unkindly from their sleep. If the majority of people in the house are performing it is well to ask the neighbours to drop in. This is what Mr Eliot was in the habit of doing. And this is why Gib Overall and Miss Cavey, André and the young women from Chelsea – why these and another

actor, undesired if not wholly unheralded – played their parts on Saturday night before a gathering of all but the grandest folk of half a county.

The arrangement was fostered by Wedge; it helped him with his church parade the next day. He liked to send certain of his authors – those particularly, like Miss Cavey, who dealt in rural and traditional themes – to church; going or coming, they would be photographed walking the country lanes in moods of anticipatory or reminiscent devotion. It helped if they could be photographed in the company of well-sounding people who made a less factitious practice of the same thing, and for this procedure on the Sunday preliminary contacts were made on the Saturday night. This year a select company of authors was to be carried to Shoon Abbey instead: a place with at least a devotional ring to it. But the neighbours had been bidden to the party just the same. A good many – those who lived farthest away or closest to real grandeur – had to be asked to dinner, a necessity which regularly threatened to be a last straw upon the Rust domestic camel. Commonly there was something of crisis with Bowles. The supplementary arrangements which had to be made, though strictly subordinated to his control, had a horrid appearance of catering. And it was the faith of Bowles that – short of the infrequent emergency of a wedding breakfast – catering was something not to be admitted to a country house. Before dinner on Saturday was Belinda's most awful hour.

Colonel and Mrs Dethlefs of Warter, the Stitts, the Stitt-Plapps, old Lady Bootomley of Wing Manor, the Ffords of Findon Hall, the Misses Unkles and their niece Angela, Lady Ladey: the

names have no significance for Mr Eliot's history, but they give the tone of the infusion which the party prescriptively suffered at this time. The new force, so solidly stone-in-the-rain, liked Mr Eliot's party well enough. Mr Eliot himself had a background of unimpeachable orthodoxy; his curious friends were amusing for four hours in the year and their jests were seldom objectionable without being savingly unintelligible as well. The stones-in-the-rain were moreover quiet stones, little publicized on the whole, and they secretly looked forward to seeing themselves posing amid exotic company in the illustrated papers the following week. They even remembered to put some of Wedge's book down on their next library list, or to buy one or two in cheap editions when faced with the boredom of the Flying Scotsman or the Blue Train. Normally, everyone was tolerably pleased – except conceivably the owner of Rust.

But dinner itself was apt to be difficult. The stones like their feed. The photographs reveal a tendency to expand in generous curves at night combined with an astonishing ability to contract again to hardness and angularity in the open air the next morning: a power said to come from careful nurture in infancy. Mr Eliot's stones looked forward to their dinner, and to wines which – having the purchasing power of the Spider behind them – operated more subtly than those at home. The party proper had the same feelings, but at this particular meal their thoughts were ranging ahead. There were thus two tempos at Mr Eliot's monstrously extended table and it was the business of such as were of disinterested mind to effect some sort of gearing system in between. At this petty social duty Winter was more successful than anybody else. Down quite a

stretch of table on either side of him he ensured an even march.

It was a consequence of this – unfortunate in the light of what was to happen – that Winter's manner and mannerisms, already familiar to the party, became impressed on the stones as well.

Looking back on the evening's appalling climax, Patricia Appleby was chiefly to remark the gradualness with which it accomplished itself. The company in the theatre passed from discomfort through mounting strain to crisis. It was like a fated progress; nor was the effect the less oppressive for being in detail demonstrably unpremeditated and impromptu. The stones, apprehending least, had perhaps the worst of it. Their minds, moving towards social censure, were unprepared for primitive dismay. More than anything else it was the tragi-comical inadequacy of their expectations which gave edge to the issue of the night.

Had Winter not been such a success at dinner; had Miss Cavey not contrived to give old Lady Bootomley an account of her morning's adventure in the barn and had Lady Bootomley not chanced some time before to consider herself pleased and edified by *Frenzied May*; above all, had the heating in the theatre been turned on a little sooner: had these things been and not been, the *milieu*, if not the brute fact, would have been different. As it was, it was upon cross-currents of irritation that the final situation broke.

The theatre was undoubtedly chilly. The thermometer may have been right while the lurking damp in the place made the skin temperature wrong. Mrs Dethleps went firmly upstairs for her cloak; Lady Bootomley, more

firmly and to an effect of much greater confusion, sent out to her car for a foot muff. In the little audience as it settled down at about ten o'clock Patricia could already discern something fatal to the success of improvised and rather esoteric mumming: on the fringe of many minds an obstinate consciousness that it might be two hours until the comforts of supper. A further appreciable depression arose when it had to be explained that the entertainment would not be of the usual kind. The new guests were variously familiar with the long episodic life of the Spider and they liked the little fantasy annually built up on his adventures; moreover it was the sufficient life's work of some of them to take a dark view of all novelty. The change made the entertainment a coterie affair. It was, in fact, a mistake. It was a mistake because it served to rekindle in the house-party itself an awareness that life at Rust had been treacherous of late. Patricia found it difficult to gauge the extent to which there was anticipation or apprehension of some further stroke by the joker. Probably few people noticed how close her brother contrived to keep to Mr Eliot. But nearly everybody was aware that Mr Eliot's chauffeur was mounting guard in the little room with the switch-boxes, and the fact hinted at possible discomfort to come. There were thus two streams of anxiety in the theatre: the fear that the entertainment might fall flat of itself, and the fear that some extraneous force might intervene and contrive to break it up.

Anxiety is the most fluid of emotions and will flow readily from one centre to another, a trick of transference which makes us often irrationally concerned over trivial things. Patricia found herself hoping, and hoping with violence, that the evening's programme would go over well. She

was not assisted to confidence by Timmy, who was still sunk in concealed apprehensions of the appearance of Henry and Eleanor, nor by Belinda, who had directed a more massive anxiety into the inadequate channel of speculation on the sufficiency of the supper to come. Only Mr Eliot was a stay. He went briskly about assuring himself of the comfort of his guests, remarking cheerfully and on all hands that the stage was set and the curtain to rise very shortly. He was seconded by Sir Rupert Eliot, who appeared to draw considerable refreshment from the society of Unkles, Stitts, and Stitt-Plapps.

The first and most considerable part of the entertainment was a play put on by certain of the obscurer and therefore more conscientious of Wedge's following. Patricia watched its progress with respect and dismay. Distinctly from the experimental theatre, it was a comedy of the neo-academic kind and might have served Winter as text for a discourse on memory. There were three characters, husband, wife, and lover. The substance of the play was their attempt to talk their problem out. The first scene gave this discussion as they anticipated it would take place. In the second the actors went through identical movements but spoke different words: this was the discussion as they came afterwards to believe it had been. In the third there were again the same gestures and a different set of words: this was what actually took place. There was a fourth scene which the author had written as an alternative to the second, and as a matter of technical interest this was played as well. By the clock the whole thing did not take long; it was peculiarly paralysing nevertheless. Colonel Dethlefs said the thing was clever and the Stitts said in chorus that it was very clever indeed:

stones-in-the-rain acknowledge no more damning expression. Lady Bootomley dug her toes into the foot muff and Mrs Dethleps buttoned up her cloak to the throat; the temperature of the theatre, though probably rising physically, fell a psychological ten degrees. Patricia confronted the ominous fact that the respectable part of the programme was now over.

And worse was indeed to come. Peter Holme, whom amateur acting made slightly sick and who knew himself as the only person present who could command an audience, determined to snatch the show from the abyss. He had – what actors commonly have not – an abundant and exact impromptu fancy; he had also a grudge which was the more dangerous because he could regard it as playful. After a trying interval in which conversation pattered about the theatre as sparingly as the first slow drops of a thunder-shower on a tin roof the curtain went up on a Holme who was holding the stage alone. His performance lasted four and a quarter minutes and was afterwards adjudged by Wedge the most incomparable thing he had ever done... It was a deadly travesty of the manner and conversation of an Oxford archaeologist.

The stones had marked Winter – at dinner he had made some effort to be marked. The stones had also approved of him; he had appeared to combine the correct allegiances with an ability to meet the intelligentsia on their own ground, to be in fact what stones regard dons and the higher clergy as paid to be. They read Holme's joke as an outrage. Class-antagonism in one of its more oblique and uncomfortable forms flooded the obstinately dingy tank of Sir Gervase Eliot.

Patricia was sitting next to the victim of Holme's pleasantry. She stole a glance at him and saw that she might let it become a frank appraisal. Winter was not amused; but neither was he annoyed, angry, or embarrassed. The life of common-rooms inures to hard knocks – and presumably it had, too, a hardening quality against unexpected onset. 'Clearly', said Patricia experimentally, 'a bit of a mistake. Not these folk's fodder and it hasn't gone down at all.'

Winter turned towards her and smiled. 'How vast the majority of young women whose murmurs would be sympathetic in tone.'

He was improving a little, Patricia thought, in the art of compliment. Nevertheless he spoke as if his mind were on something else. As it indeed plainly was; Winter's eye had come reluctantly away from Mr Eliot and her brother; he was interested in the core of a situation, not in its accidents even if dramatically directed against himself. 'I don't think you at all need sympathy,' she said.

'We must reserve our sympathy for our host. It is, as you say, a misfire. In Wing and Cold Findon a neat lampoon is caviare to the general.' He nodded towards Detleps. 'And to the colonel too.' He paused appreciatively over this oddly constructed pun and glanced round the theatre. 'I wonder how Timmy is taking it? On the whole he seems to bear up well. There's stuffing in Timmy.'

Even in the face of the obvious benevolence of this Patricia was pleased. But she said dryly, 'A good dinner, wasn't it?'

'It won't save the situation now.' Detected in amiability, Winter retreated on malice. 'The show is dead. *Si monumentum requiris circumspice.*'

'They do look a bit grim.'

'And behind the scenes we may take it consternation reigns. I expect Overall is due to recite Wedge's poem through one of those absurd masks. He's funkng it and feeling sad. And he's quite right; it would be just another of his professional appearances as a failure. Without Holme's mocking of that well-bred man from Oxford they'd have taken it. Now they're bristling with ghastly good taste. There was a sound of revelry by night, but the gathered chivalry of Pigg and Limber thought it low. Lower than Low Swaffham itself.' Particularly delighted with this childish sally, Winter let his laugh – his well-bred Oxford laugh – float across the uneasily silent theatre

They put on Miss Cavey. *A Haworth Saturday Night* might be not altogether grateful to finical sensibilities, but at least it outraged none but the dead. Miss Cavey, taking upon herself the character of Emily Brontë, created around her by means of ingenious monologue a little world of father, brother, sisters, and dumb friends. This is a species of entertainment which has been successfully achieved once in the recorded history of the stage and it was felt that Miss Cavey deserved great credit for her bold attempt on a difficult variety. It was obvious that she started with distinct physical disadvantages. Emily Brontë could not have been quite so stout on such spare fare as the Rev. Mr Brontë could provide, nor had she the fortune to attain Miss Cavey's years. This gave all the greater scope for a triumph of spirit over the flesh. Miss Cavey had any amount of spirit. Of those who had qualms only Peter Holme had the resolution to leave; he retired to drinks in

the solitude of the library and was not seen again. The stones, many of whom had been persuaded to read *Jane Eyre* at school, were interested and pleased. At the eleventh hour – and it was in fact just past eleven o'clock – the entertainment took on some promise of success. This made the incident of Keeper all the more unfortunate.

Keeper was Emily Brontë's dog. The climax of Miss Cavey's presentation was Emily's courageous confronting of this normally faithful creature when it was supposed to have contracted rabies. Everything else – even the tense scene in which the drunken Branwell was confounded by citations from Anne's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* – stood subordinated to this terrific finale.

Emily was advancing upon an imaginary Keeper supposed to be located down stage right. Miss Cavey had talent; the audience was really held; even on Winter's face Patricia could discern an impressed and attentive horror. It was at this moment that there appeared from the wings down stage left a monstrous and familiar figure. A blob of a nose, a mottled snout, a lachrymose eye, a large mottled drooping ear – the creature is called a Dismal Desmond and is known in every nursery. This Dismal Desmond was enormous. Skilfully manipulated from behind, it advanced on the unconscious Emily with obscene sniffings even as Emily advanced on the invisible Keeper.

Somebody – afterwards maintained by rumour to have been the admirable Toplady – rang down the curtain. A horrid silence – silence all the more horrid for being not quite silence but a trembling void of suppressed mirth – was broken by Lady Bootomley. She summed up the feelings of her

contingent in historic words. 'We are not amused,' Lady Bootomley said.

Winter learnt across to Patricia. 'And that', he murmured, 'is that. Nothing more appalling can occur.'

He was wrong. By what coup the thing was accomplished remained obscure. But even as he spoke the curtain rose again. Miss Cavey was still on the stage, clearly with no exact notion of what had happened. Dismal Desmond was on the stage too, and he had been joined by three further stuffed canine monstrosities even larger than himself. In the same second that this tableau was disclosed the animals began to rise in the air. Three were noosed in rope; Dismal Desmond was seen to be transfixed by an enormous butcher's hook; all four were drawn up until they hung suspended about Miss Cavey's ears.

And then once more the forces of order gained control. The curtain fell for good. It blotted out a stage immobile save for a stream of sawdust which trickled from the ruptured bowels of Dismal Desmond to the floor.

When the post-mortems were held in the drawing-rooms of Wing and Warter and King's Cleeve Lady Bootomley – who was unpopular in the county anyway – met with a good deal of censure for the extreme course she took. For Lady Bootomley paused to condole with Miss Cavey on the tasteless way in which her beautiful evocation had been destroyed and then, tucking her foot muff under her arm, explained to Belinda why she felt unable to stay to supper. The snow had been heavy, she said, and the horses must

be considered. She then got into her car and was driven away.

Most of the stones reacted differently. Richard Eliot, they felt – and stones have a strange power of feeling in a body – had been born in the heart of the quarry; the right thing was to rally round when his queer fish landed him in a mess. So the stones stayed to supper, only showing their perturbation by moving in a compact petrofactive mass and adopting a defensive formation at one end of the dining-room. Into this mass Rupert Eliot vanished – a frank deserter, pale with emotion. Archie Eliot, although already suspected as the technician behind the *débacle*, moved about as blandly and comfortably as was his wont. The little man André, the secret of whose brown-paper parcels was now clear, had discreetly withdrawn. Timmy, his fears about Henry and Eleanor having proved groundless, was in an access of spirits and had hurled them all into a covert declaration of war against the stones. His chosen weapon was drink; with luck and a sound knowledge of his father's cellar, he told Patricia, it might be possible to get them all tight yet – the old women first. And that would teach them to sniff at a whiff of intelligent satire.

This pleasingly undiplomatic attitude seemed to be not altogether unsupported by Mr Eliot. Or at least Mr Eliot felt that alcohol in its more rarefied forms might act as a badly needed lubricant. He carried a great deal about himself, with Appleby as a second line of supply close at his elbow. Here and there the elements of ease returned to the party. At least the thing was over. Supper would decently conclude and dispersal would follow.

What followed, however, was the affair – anticlimax or interlude – of Gib Overall. Here the engineer was Archie, who knew much more about the compounding of drinks than Timmy. He had found Overall in gloom, anguished at the sense of a great opportunity lost. Skilfully avoiding a metamorphosis to mere merriment, he had induced the comparatively rare state known as fighting drunk. And then he had pointed out that, after all, it was not too late. Thus it came about that when the company, rallying to the cause of social decency, was endeavouring to put all thought and memory of the theatre away, and when the tonic virtue of Mr Eliot's wines and the sedative virtue of Mr Eliot's dining-room were successfully combining to this end, there erupted upon the scene an uproarious figure in a mask – a mask which was distinguishable libel on Mr Wedge – declaiming unintelligible verses interspersed with lucid, simple, and tersely Saxon threats, and finally collapsing on the floor like an animated doll at the conclusion of a ballet. He was removed by Kermode and a resolute stone. In this embarrassing pot-house process the mask fell off and rolled across the floor. The effect of decapitation pointed but did not relieve the grotesque of the performance. It was a final blow. The Cavey affair, it was now even possible to feel in the retrospect, had contained some saving element of savage wit. Overall's effort was unredeemed.

It was at the end of the succeeding shattered ten minutes that Patricia again bumped into Winter – a Winter who was openly troubled for the first time that night. For a second he eyed her speculatively. Then he asked abruptly, 'Miss Appleby, was that just a decorative flourish?'

Patricia put down a hot concoction which had been brought by Timmy. A sip of it had been driving an uneasy warmth about her body; she now felt a sudden and unaccountable chill. 'Whatever do you mean?'

'It strikes me as having had – by design or accident – a structural significance as well.' Winter's state was revealed in an odd blend of urgency and pedantry. 'What Dethlefs would call a masking movement. We all goggled at gibbering Gib – and as we goggled our host disappeared.'

Rapidly Patricia scanned the crowded room. 'John's gone too.'

Winter nodded. 'I suppose that makes it all right. Only I rather wish I were gone as well.'

'My brother can do rough-house when that sort of thing's needed. I don't think you need be alarmed.' Patricia tried the concoction again. It was nauseous. She realized that like Winter she was uneasy beyond the logical needs of the situation. 'What's the time?'

Winter produced a sliver of a watch. 'Five minutes to twelve.'

They looked at each other in silence, unassured by the knowledge that there were a dozen reasons why Mr Eliot might have left the room. Rupert and Archie were also invisible; Timmy and Belinda were holding the fort together. It was the moment at which the visitors were thinking of taking their leave; several could be seen preparing for this manoeuvre: locating Belinda, endeavouring to locate Mr Eliot. The point was one at which their host should not have made himself invisible. Winter gave this situation

one further glance. 'I think I'll take a look round,' he said, and threaded his way to the door.

Patricia, equally restless, edged her way to a window and slipped through thick curtains; after a moment she could see something of the night. The stones would have a fair journey home. The snow had stopped, the sky was clearing and the moon had ridden high: the edge to the terrace before her was merged in the boldly crenellated shadow of Caroline gables. The disused and pitted elm-avenue, the little comedy of the Dutch canal, a segment of the park beyond: all had the slightly bewildering strangeness in which the conjoined novelties of moonlight and snow steep a known and accustomed scene. The moon itself, it occurred to Patricia, was the most familiar – the least disturbing – part of the picture: a domestic effect which might have been a part of the estate, its neighbourliness emphasized by the unwinking remoteness of a planet hard by. It was very still outside. Despite the disintegrating conversation behind her – the burst-out squibs and guttering candle-ends of talk in which the disastrous party was coming to an end – she could hear her pulse counting out the seconds like a soft drum beating far across the snow.

It was midnight.

She turned back into the room and almost ran into Dr Chown, who seemed to have retreated to the window in order to make a detached survey of the scene. He looked at Patricia with severity – rather as if she were a child he had detected in mischief – and said, 'This is a very extraordinary thing.'

Patricia felt rather than observed what he was talking about. A group of guests was taking leave of Belinda – awkwardly, in the absence of their

host. But this was not the point. The party was in the act of swapping anxieties, of turning from the known social stresses of the night to apprehension massive and undefined. It was impossible to tell from what centre the new feeling had spread. Not, Patricia thought, from Mr Eliot's children: the thing was coming at, not from, Timmy and Belinda. And seconds after she looked it had reached them. Twice Belinda had said as she shook hands, 'I can't think what's become of my father: you may meet him in the hall.' Now, saying goodbye to the Detlefs, she said it again in a tone revealing that the tide had gone over her. There was a startled silence. And – as if the silence had been some potent invocation tonight – darkness descended for the third time on Rust Hall.

Warfare and salesmanship alike discount the notion that familiarity breeds contempt. It is when the quiet sector to which we have been moved proves as active as the one we have left that the line breaks; it is when the eye has idly scanned the slogan a score of times that we name our brand in the shop. This third quenching of the lights was the most effective of all.

It was as well, then, that dispositions had been made. An electricity supply which festoons itself across a park cannot be guarded against active and informed mischief; the chauffeur in the switchroom had been merely a fragmentary precaution; another now came into operation. The lights had been out a matter of seconds only when a body of Mr Eliot's servants entered with lamps and candles. Bowles, who had a sense of style, brought up the rear with Rust's fifty electric torches on a large silver tray.

Patricia chuckled even in the midst of her alarm. This was John's first active stroke at Rust – a stroke at once beneficent and disturbing. It was beneficent because it prevented imponderable confusion and it was disturbing because it gave the show away to the stones. Lights may go out by accident. But accident prepares no counter-measures to operate with a swiftness and efficiency which might be the envy of a Cabinet. All but the vaguest of Mr Eliot's guests realized, as Bowles passed solemnly among them with his tray, that this was equipment for some obscure but imminent battle. Colonel Dethlefs, who was a great hand at the rural fortification of neo-medieval England, began to talk of getting the women to the cellars. At this moment Miss Cavey yelled.

It was natural that Miss Cavey should yell; it was her habit in a crisis, and she had endured a horrid day. Only the stones thought to look for any special occasion for her demonstration; it was the stones who first saw what she had seen. In the doorway there loomed a lurching, reeling figure. Two storm lanterns had been placed on the floor near by; these and the flicker of torches showed momentarily only an enigma of mass and line, like some common object projected at a precious angle on a screen. The figure advanced and became Archie Eliot. Miss Cavey yelled again. Chown began to push himself forward from the window. Archie staggered, fell, rolled over like a stage casualty; raised himself on an elbow, pointed waveringly at the door, hoarsely exclaimed 'Richard!' and with a final slow turn like the last momentum of a billiard ball half-disappeared under a table and lay still. Chown bent over him; because he had done this just twenty-four hours before the scene had a quality

as of ghostly music. 'Sir Archibald', said Chown, 'is wounded in the head. Cold water, towels, quiet and take Miss Cavey from the room.'

There was immediate hush; it made an effective background for the entrance of Mr Eliot's chauffeur. He hurried over to Timmy and spoke in a penetrating whisper which carried to everyone present. 'Mr Timothy...at the front door...I don't know what. Would you and some of the gentlemen come?'

The request licensed action. Timmy and Belinda pushed their way out; Colonel Dethlefs, assuming command of the stones, created in so many seconds a garrison and a reconnoitring force; the latter he led into the hall. It seemed to Patricia that the stones, with dramatic instincts of their own, were nicely calculated pawns in what was going forward – but it was not the moment for penetrating reflections and she hurried after Belinda. She was in time for the scene beneath the portico.

Air, sharply cold, struck through Ionic pillars which framed a night of snow and stars. The moon was at a zenith; trees about the park waded in shadows of ink; the farther prospect shimmered in uncertain perspective, like invisible mountains photographed through a screen. Snow was on the steps to the terrace and had crept in a thin powdering round the base of the pillars and beyond. The terrace itself was a great open page of snow. The party looked down on it as from a lectern and read the imprint of violence.

At the innermost verge of the snow's drift beneath the pediment two sets of footprints came into being, leading away from the house. Side by side they went down the steps, turned right, skirted a little shrubbery and disappeared in

chaos. Over an area perhaps the size of a boxing-ring the snow, a thin carpeting on the ground, had been scraped and scarred in a score of bold arcs and thrusting gashes – dark lines of force which told of digging toes and skidding heels. It was a battlefield and deserted; at its farther limit an obscure trail, as of a pygmean army in retreat, disappeared down the drive. On these evidences the moon, the stars, and Mr Eliot's horrified party looked down.

The reconnoitring force, a dark mass with Belinda, Patricia, and an escorting Mrs Moule as a sort of colourful cavalry in the midst, ran over the terrace. The trail down the drive elucidated nothing: here and there a footprint, half obliterated by some dragging, tumbling process behind. A voice called out, 'There's something down the drive.'

They strained their eyes ahead. In a pool of moonlight between the shadows of gigantic elms an indeterminate black blotch stained the snow. Strung out, as if in a race already far advanced, they hurried forward; the less controlled of those behind were exclaiming, 'Who is it?' when those in front had already discovered – so deceptive are the proportions of things in moonlight – that it was a hat, a soft black hat such as a dinner-jacketed gentleman might take up. It passed from Colonel Dethlefs to Belinda. In a sudden stillness she said 'Daddy's.' At the same instant from somewhere to the left came a single dreadful cry.

Mrs Moule said, 'The river.' Colonel Dethlefs called out, 'Keep to the trail.' He was too late; a bevy of the more impetuous – stones and queer fish mingled – had wheeled and were plunging in the direction of the sound. The main body

continued to pound down the drive. They rounded a corner and were at fault. The trail seemed to split. There was a momentary scattering. A heavy cloud, pat as a tactician who had bided his time, made an extinguishing pounce on the moon.

As if the game of the night before had been bundled incontinently out of doors, the firefly-flicker of torches criss-crossed about Rust Park. Patricia's torch, circling, illuminated Wedge. For a man whose principal asset was at an unknown hazard Wedge looked remarkably composed. 'Do you', he asked – and the military nature of the situation seemed to have impressed itself upon him – 'know this damned terrain?'

'Not well. But we're still on the drive, and the drive begins by circling the house.'

'And the river? Wedge was a sedentary soul; he had visited Rust for years without straying beyond the gardens.

'Quite a bit away – almost certainly not in the picture.'

'Those confounded action-stories', said Wedge, 'put things in people's heads. I think I'll transfer to talking-fiction. Come on.' He lumbered forward and Patricia followed. Wedge had greatness in his kind; this fantastic alarm had really started in his consciousness some Napoleonic change of plan. But Patricia's own immediate concern was in having lost contact with Belinda. She paused and listened. Behind them the night was filled with distressed murmurs, sudden exclamations of despair. One group of searchers had been betrayed between the false avenue and the true; the luckless fishponds were about them and they were exchanging snow for abundant mud. On this confusion the moon once more emerged, like a

farmer popping up his head to view some unseemly scene over a hedge. The reconnaissance had disintegrated badly; the cold and flooding light revealed a scattering of figures arabesqued about the park. It was a composition perfectly picturesque; a junketing, wintry and nocturnal, in the manner of Teniers or Both – macabre and crazy comedy on which the moon appropriately looked down.

Dethlefs summoned his dispersed levies; waving an arm in the air, he clapped a hand on the crown of his head: for Patricia, unversed in the art of war, the gesture held a crowning lunacy. Other senior stones decided that the time had come to shout; commandingly, encouragingly, urgently they bawled the name of Eliot to the stars. A bubble of hysterical laughter grew in Patricia; it was mercifully pricked by a firm clasp on her hand. Mrs Moule was beside her – had grabbed to steady herself while kicking off high-heeled shoes. 'I don't think', said Mrs Moule obscurely, 'they ought to mind.' They ran together in stockinged feet. 'There', said Mrs Moule triumphantly, 'is Belinda. I think we should all keep together on a night like this.'

The drive had taken those who held to it – the party with Dethlefs at its head – on a half-circle; the park had wheeled on them as if they were after a hare; the house, momentarily concealed, must still be close to them on their right. Patricia, coming up with Belinda and Timmy in the van, glanced behind her to get her bearings. Everyone else was staring ahead; she alone witnessed the defection of Kermode.

Kermode was out of condition and laboured in consequence more than people who had never been in it. Patricia's eye caught him as he had

dropped to a walk. His expression could be clearly read; with a troubled face he was staring absently up at the moon. Perhaps he was as anxious as everybody else; perhaps his was merely an intellectual resentment of mystery. He looked from the moon to the ground and then across the park. The line of his gaze was towards a solitary light which shone perhaps half a mile away. Suddenly his expression, as if under the force of some inner illumination, changed to glee. A moment later he had slipped from the drive, climbed a stile or fence, and was sauntering across the snow. Patricia was about to turn back to investigate when she was arrested by the most violent stroke yet achieved on this alarming night.

From somewhere in or near the house a pistol-shot rang out over the park. Its echoes were blended with a briefly succession of choked and ebbing screams, an agony of sound more horrible, because more urgent of sheer and unhuman pain, than the single cry which had gone before.

The stones stopped shouting, turned towards the house and ran. The foremost stumbled again upon a clear trail: kitchen gardens, stables, a lawn streamed uncertainly past. Rust rose up before the runners in the unfamiliar aspect of a high blank wall. Ivy-covered, it soared in the moonlight like a frozen and impending sea. Across its waxen glitter the startled bats fluttered, pitching their futile faint exclamings against unhearing ears.

In the centre of the wall a single dark door stood open.

Timmy and Belinda – because they knew the ground or because, unlike the others, they had hesitated for no fraction of a second – were through first. A dozen people followed; there was a wary flickering of torches; the party discovered itself as being in Sir Gervase Eliot's theatre once more. The unexpected familiarity of the place was momentarily bewildering, and in a moment's bewildered pause the theatre made itself felt. High up, the narrows sea-green windows faintly pricked the dark; transparent fingers of sea-green light groped down the walls, grew insubstantial and faded, still high overhead. Dead, chill, and vacant, the theatre was as eerie as an intralunar cage. The acrid smell of gunpowder added its suggestion of some subterraneous mineral recess and from somewhere, like a moist exudation through stratified rock, came the slow drip of liquid falling from a height...

The torches explored a litter of chairs, a glove, a scattering of the programmes which had explained the problematical little play – the debris of the ruined evening. The torches crept farther, searched for the curtain which had been rung down on the confusion of Miss Cavey. It had vanished. Like startled hands which in the dark fail to meet expected resistance, the torches tumbled their light beneath the proscenium-arch and conjured up a cast of shadows in the depth beyond. This was the end of the trail; this was the entertainment to which the evening and the night had moved. The Rust theatricals were over and there had succeeded a show more exquisitely conceived. On the deserted boards Drama in invisible robes sat throned.

For a moment the searchers wavered; then they ran forward and took the line of footlights like the last breastwork in an attack. Timmy and Belinda were in front; Belinda, outstripping her brother, slipped and fell on hands and knees amid a sprinkling of Dismal Desmond's sawdust. Timmy's torch flashed downwards. Hard by the sawdust a pool had formed on the floor. Belinda's trailing white frock was stained with blood.

Again there came a tiny splash of falling liquid and the pool at their feet stirred in little circles. Torches flashed upwards and probed, amid suspended canyons of darkness, the confusion of joists, runners, and hangings. The first through caught, immensely high, the grotesque posteriors of an enormous dog; swept on to catch another creature's paws, the drooping tail of a third. But Desmond himself was gone; a shout from the wings told that he had been discovered on the floor; his body, horridly eviscerated, was immediately floodlit by a dozen torches, and as immediately disappeared into darkness when the torches swept aloft once more. Stark realization came to almost everybody at once. It was with purpose that Desmond had been removed from his hook. Beside the three noosed, dumpy dogs hung a long darker figure. There was a second's agonized doubt and a torch, deftly directed, caught amid the obscuring hangings a circle of black and braided cloth.

Chill confusion was cut by the voice of Winter, calling for help with the ropes. Dethlefs was beside him; Wedge came up. The dark figure above stirred, sickeningly rotated, began to descend. A pulley creaked – unendingly, like a tumbril heard in some dream of terror.

The body sagged to the floor. Timmy threw himself down beside it; appeared to be hurled by some physical impact once more to his feet.

Before them, transfixed by the great hook and grotesquely bagged in evening trousers, lay the carcase of a middle-black pig.

PART THREE

Shoon Abbey

'Length and depth.'

England, unwearied and infinitely various mistress, had turned again from darkness to the sun. Never had she yawned and stretched herself in just these diaphanous robes before Time, rolling back beyond the building of the temperance institute at Pigg, beyond the arterial roads, beyond the vanished turnpikes, beyond the bridle paths which had wound through unenclosed pastures; time, retracing the generations of the cattle until they grew long and lank and lathy; time, fading finally away in geological eternities: time had never witnessed just this configuration of light and shadow, just these driftings of mist and vapour over the land; had never garnered in its winter harvests just this November day.

'Length and depth,' repeated Mr Eliot. 'Length and depth, and the back slightly roached.'

The great car consumed the miles.

'Climate', said Winter at the back – and one gathered that he was presenting an apologia for being an archaeologist – 'climate is all. Wedge would have me write a book; I reply that were I to go after self-expression it would be in paint. But climate forbids the development of plastic art in this country.' He swept a theoretical eye over the landscape. 'If only one were an Eskimo.'

'If only the Curly Coated were a little less coarse in the bone.'

'An Eskimo?' Appleby spoke not at all because he wanted Winter to continue his reflections. The interjection had been required and was offered as a matter of social duty. His mind was on the problematical territory before them.

'An Eskimo,' repeated Winter. 'To live perpetually enveloped in that stainless and radiant white which is the symbol of eternity. In Labrador great art must be possible – nay, must inevitably exist: an art wholly unsensuous, abstract, moulded by that one dazzling discipline of the senses to the service of transcendental truth.' He gestured patronizingly at the fading patches of snow about them.

'I am looking forward to the Tamworths,' said Eliot. 'And to the Collection, of course.'

'As certain a supersensible art on the fringes of the polar circle as an art richly sensuous, brilliantly spectroscopic, on the fringes of the Mediterranean. All right to be an Eskimo, all right to be a Titian or' – he hesitated – 'Renoir. It is this half-world of mist, of muted and fugitive colour' – and he gestured again – 'that is the devil.'

Mr Eliot twisted round in his seat beside Patricia at the wheel. 'I hope', he said – and it seemed to be the mention of Renoir which momentarily diverted him from his theme – 'that Rupert will come on with the others. I should particularly like him to see the Abbey.'

'Climate' – Winter was an insistent as a lecturer driving home his topic sentence – 'is all.' He turned to Mrs Moule. 'Consider the unblushing fore-and-aft voluptuousness, the full-buttocked

and high-bosomed *yakshi* of the most sacred Indian Buddhist art. Observe them transplanted along with the religion of Buddhism to China. Within a couple of generations acclimatization is at work, whittling at those prodigal hips, deflating those balloon-like breasts, attenuating to the rhythms of the Chinese visual scene that more than Rubensish exuberance of the flesh.'

'The flesh?' Mr Eliot again twisted round. 'It must be firm. Freedom of movement is therefore essential. Plenty of ground and plenty of routing. It is there that the modern intensive methods fail.'

He paused, lit up all over. 'I think you will all agree that there are few more interesting subjects than pigs.'

Appleby reviewed the night. The thing was engineered economically enough. Rust had two independent telephones and the joker had rung from one to the other. He asked the servant who answered for Sir Archibald Eliot and when Archie spoke begged that Mr Eliot would come at once to Mr Laslett's house across the park; there had been a serious accident and Laslett wanted the security of a Justice of the Peace at the witnessing of a hasty will. Archie found his cousin, who set out at once, accompanied by Appleby as an obvious measure of prudence. Mr Eliot's message of apology to his guests had been entrusted to Archie – and no sooner had they parted than Archie was hit on the head. The joker then followed Mr Eliot's and Appleby's tracks and rapidly faked the appearance of a struggle in the snow. He continued this to the point where they had left the drive: it was here that Kermode was to read the traces accurately and saunter off to meet Mr Eliot and Appleby returning from their

fool's errand. The joker then contrived to cut off the electricity supply where it crossed the drive, and continued to make some sort of trail to the theatre. He went some way across the park; waited for the right moment to give his single alarming cry; hurried back to the theatre; killed a pig held in readiness, extracting from the brute as much noise as possible; clothed it in trousers and slung it up in place of Dismal Desmond.

It was all so simple that it could be conjecturally reconstructed like this in a few sentences; but its simplicity had depended on time-table work the virtuosity of which roused Appleby's professional admiration. The mechanics had been good; and so, for that matter, had been the psychology. The subtle mind which had so quickly seen how Timmy could be goaded by Henry and Eleanor had made a number of chancy but accurate calculations here too: that the evidence of the servant who answered the telephone would not get through to any responsible person in time; that under the influence of the stones-in-the-rain the party would behave as, in fact, it did; that anyone endeavouring to find out who had kept an eye on whom would meet with impressions which were hopelessly contradictory and confused... The hoax of the middle black had been as clever as it was essentially brutal; nevertheless some ground was cleared.

Mr Eliot himself was let out. Neither under Winter's wildly conjectured hypnotic influence nor in the much more subtle fashion supposed by Dr Chown could he be responsible for persecuting himself. Appleby said goodbye to this theory with a sigh – the same sort of sigh with which Mr Eliot himself might have dismissed a plot too exquisite

for his capacities... Mr Eliot, now so placidly discoursing to Patricia on his favourite rural themes, had played no tricks on himself. Nevertheless Appleby could not feel that he was done with Mr Eliot; that the owner of Rust had ceased to puzzle him. There had been a point at which the joker had got Mr Eliot down; had driven him to speculations which had trembled on the edge of mental chaos. The joker had played a number of vexatious and spectacular tricks, but analysis showed that his single effective weapon had been his uncanny command of matter which Mr Eliot believed had never passed the boundaries of his own mind. This was what had driven Mr Eliot to the wall and almost ended his career as a writer; it was from this that he had mysteriously rallied. Mysteriously. Appleby found that the lapse of twenty-four hours had set the events of Saturday morning in a new focus, and that in this his host's rally showed as inadequately motivated. The manifestations at Rust were not an irruption from the world of imaginative creation; not were they the result of the Spider's inventor's developing a secondary and purely Spidery personality. From each of these nonsensical but haunting speculations Mr Eliot had abruptly broken free – and broken free because the Renoir had been found bedded with Joseph. Mr Eliot's explanation of his new rationality had been specious: his Spider, he implied, never behaved in quite that unrefined way; neither could he do so himself even in a fragmented psychological state.

Because Mr Eliot's and Dr Chown's speculations had been so extravagant in themselves it had not been immediately observable that this avenue of escape from them was, at the lowest, intellectually inadequate. And Mr Eliot, though

volatile, was clearly a highly intelligent man: had he really satisfied himself with such a line of thought? It now seemed hard to believe. Yet his rally – the breakdown of the campaign against his mental balance – unquestionably dated from the recovery of the stolen picture. And from the same point dated what Appleby obscurely distinguished as a growing purposefulness in the man. This talk of good baconers – one had come to recognize it as a sign that Mr Eliot's wits were at work.

But from the centre of the picture – or from the centre of the picture as it had hitherto been composed – Mr Eliot was now displaced. So were his children. And who else?

The more Appleby reflected on this – the more he reviewed the brief enquiries he had been able to make – the less certain did he become. Was Kermode out? Patricia's eye had been on him disappearing across the park seconds before the shooting of the middle black. But if Kermode was the joker – and Appleby recalled the ambiguous conversation he had overheard – he had an assistant at a pinch in Gib Overall. How drunk had Overall really been? Too drunk to slip to the theatre and there to shoot, spit, and hoist the pig? Drunk enough not to realize the outrageousness of the act? It had been a good joke of its kind – and all on Timmy and Belinda: a great deal of trouble had been taken to persuade them that they had witnessed the murder of their father. It was a point that the joke was an improvisation; it had sprung from André's joke – itself an improvisation – against Miss Cavey and her unfortunate experience in the barn. It was a point too that the joke had been a *joke*; nobody had, in fact, been murdered at midnight. Was this because an intended victim was not then readily

murderable, or because the joker intended no more than to go on joking? The *temper* of the joke had been murderous. One could almost feel the middle black as a sort of totem animal, a sacrificial substitute for Mr Eliot himself – a Mr Eliot whom the joker was at once wishful and afraid to kill... Fantastic thus to introduce primitive anthropology into the problem. And the affair of the pig had been, surely, purposive rather than ritualistic; it looked much like another attempt to disgust Mr Eliot with the milieu of his professional imaginings.

These were ragged reflections; Appleby turned back to possible eliminations. Archie Eliot. The first picture which had sprung to Appleby's peculiarly schooled mind had been of Archie strolling quietly from one telephone to intercept a servant answering at another. Simple enough. How badly then had Archie been wounded? Could the wound have been self-inflicted? What had happened to him when he had been left in charge of Chown? Could he have got away in time for the cry, for the final business with the pig? This remained to discover, and it meant – what Appleby had not so far contrived – another conference with Chown.

And nobody else could be called definitely out. During the vital half-hour round midnight a surprising number of people had slipped from observation; there had been a sort of smoke-screen of stormy stones. Never a case, thought Appleby, needing so much patient digging around on the spot; never a case in which there was so little chance of anything of the sort. Back at Rust the majority of Mr Eliot's party was preparing to disperse on the morrow; and here meantime were others punctiliously fulfilling an engagement

to visit Shoon Abbey. From every concrete evidence of the mystery he was now being hurtled rapidly away.

Nevertheless to Shoon Abbey certain dubious filaments stretched out. The first act of the joker had been to burgle Mrs Birdwire and news of this burglary had upset a certain Horace Benton, once disreputably employed by Jasper Shoon himself. At the Abbey was Benton's colleague Bussenschutt, who had been prompted by these events to an ingenious cultivation of the burgled lady. Here in the car was Gerald Winter, who had communicated Timmy's story of the burglary to the others, and who had become so laudably anxious to investigate the troublesome incidents at the home of his pupil Timmy Eliot. The connexion between these facts was obscure, but could scarcely be illusory.

They were off to the Abbey now in fulfilment of a visit which had been in the air for some days. Appleby wondered how the project had originated. Belinda worked at the Abbey, but until yesterday its owner and Mr Eliot had been only slightly acquainted. Yesterday Shoon had appeared, flanked by Bussenschutt and Mrs Birdwire, and had presented something between an invitation and a summons to the Rust party at large. By what had this been prompted? There was, it seemed, a considerable party at the Abbey already: nothing less than a gathering of that dubious organization to which Shoon, with unamiably but sufficient irony, had given the title of Friends of the Venerable Bede. With these were now to be mingled the servants of the Spider. Who had engineered this fusion? And for what purpose? For Appleby found himself convinced that the plot was still thickening and

that this expansive expedition was not mere drift. The mystery which lay behind lay in front as well.

Mrs Moule had come to a different conclusion. 'Of course,' she said, 'I am looking forward to seeing the Abbey too. But I would be just a *shade* happier if these horrid jokes had been cleared up first. We do a little seem to be running away. And they have been so confusing as well as horrid that they tend to go round and round in one's head.'

'A mighty maze,' said Mr Eliot, 'but not without a plan... Has anyone got a match?'

Appleby, supplying matches, wondered what way the wind was wont to be blowing when his host turned from pigs to Pope.

'And after all,' said Winter, 'nearly everybody is coming across. I shouldn't be surprised if we make considerable headway at the Abbey.'

'I agree.' Mr Eliot, without turning round, spoke with brisk decision. 'And curiously enough Rupert – who has, you know, great knowledge of the world – made exactly the same remark before we set out. John, what do you think?'

'It doesn't seem at all unlikely that we are carrying our domestic incubus with us.'

Mrs Moule, impressed by this mysterious unanimity, peered rather anxiously ahead. 'You really think so? I'm sure Mr Shoon's home is a most dangerous place for jokers. All those guns and explosives and things. Belinda' – Belinda and Timmy were on the little seats in front of her – 'does he keep his sinister wares on the premises?'

Belinda laughed. 'I've never seen any. But it's a big place and there are mysterious doings sometimes in the ruins. I think they do a little quiet research.'

'It seems to me in *rather* bad taste', said Mrs Moule, 'to construct what is almost a *religious* setting for that sort of thing... Of course I don't mean anything that Sir Archibald had to do with.'

'Sir Archibald?' Appleby stiffened abruptly against luxurious upholstery.

'It's the only thing', explained Timmy – he had scarcely spoken since they set out – 'that Archie has done since his bridge. Shoon knew Archie long before Belinda went to the Abbey. And he called him in over the west tower. Ruined towers, it seems, are uncommonly tricky. You have to get permission from county authorities before you put up that sort of thing. Shoon got Archie to make quite an engineering job of it. They were quite thick, one gathers, for a while.'

Belinda nodded. 'And the tower really is a triumph. A single wall supporting an impending mass of masonry. Actually it's an affair of steel girders anchored in the bowels of the earth.'

'But the Collection' – Mr Eliot broke in as if to defend his daughter's association with all this wantonness – 'must be quite without extravagance. The Shoon Catalogues are recognized by scholars everywhere.'

So there, thought Appleby, was another link. Archie and Shoon; perhaps it was Archie who was behind the present expedition. 'Will Sir Archibald', he asked, 'be fit to come over today?'

Mr Eliot shook his head. 'I think not. Chown declares the wound to be not serious, but he

advises rest. I am really rather anxious—'

A hoot – the discreet but commanding hoot of a well-considered siren – drowned the rest of the sentence. Patricia drew to the side; a cream car even larger than that in which they were travelling drew level and passed; the figure at the wheel with grave courtesy took off his hat and displayed a profusely bandaged head; beside him could be glimpsed the unengaging grin of Rupert Eliot; amid a huddle of forms behind were Miss Cavey and Wedge. Loudly above the purr of their own engine Timmy sighed. 'Who could say', he asked, 'that Eliots don't stick together? The whole lot of us on each other's heels.'

It was an overstatement. And Appleby was to remember the sense of cloudy illumination with which he noted the fact.

'By the way,' said Belinda, 'the guns and bombs are taboo. Jasper doesn't like them brought up. Merchant, he says, are a useful and respectable class of men, but he doesn't care to be thought of in that light. He is just a *curioso* – and, of course, a *virtuoso* too.'

Mr Eliot nodded sympathetically. 'After all,' he said, 'John will agree with me that it is nice to get away from the atmosphere of one's profession when one can.' He smiled cheerfully at the appositeness of this reflection. 'And armament people particularly must find their job weighing on them at times. There is so much public opprobrium. They are condemned even by many who still support the traditional view that the soldier's is the most honourable of callings. I have never quite satisfied myself that it is fair. We don't, after all, approve surgeons and

condemn instrument-makers.' Mr Eliot – this time that determinedly liberal Mr Eliot who insisted on what capital fellows Rupert and Archie really were – looked about him for support and received none. 'Of course,' he continued, 'I know that these people sometimes foment trouble for the sake of profits. But I am sure that a person with Shoon's scholarly interests would not do that.' He sighed, appeared to make some reluctant reference to the book of human nature as it was known to him. '*Or almost sure...* Patricia, my dear, there is somebody signalling to us.'

It was Dr Bussenschutt. Surprisingly dressed in knickerbockers and an ancient leather-trimmed shooting jacket, he was gesturing with mingled affability and command from a tump of grass by the roadside. As the car drew to a halt he advanced and removed a tweed cap in which were entangled several dry-fly of a type popular, a connoisseur would have remarked, in the eighteen-nineties. His face, massively benevolent, thrust itself through a window. There are those', said Dr Bussenschutt – and his speech had the too-considered tempo of something which has been framed seconds before – 'who delight in the flying wheels, the supercharged engine, and the Olympian dust. But I' – he gestured vaguely in the direction from which he had come – 'have loved the rural walk through ways of grassy swarth.'

Mr Eliot was delighted. 'I am myself', he said, 'a devotee of Cowper. And now Horace and he go hand and hand in song.'

As Mr Eliot had thus contrived at once to identify Bussenschutt's quotations and to say so in a single line of Pope's it might be supposed, Appleby felt, that the honours of this wantonly

belletristic engagement were all with him. It was a pity that Archie was not present to cap them both, and well might the lot of them be gravitating round the *virtuoso* and *curioso* of Shoon Abbey. Timmy, Belinda, and Patricia alone looked severe; what are graces to one generation will always appear slightly shameful inanities to the next. But Bussenschutt's speech now revealed itself as not without design; having offered some further *facetiae* on the theme of automobilism and pedestrianism he proceeded to solicit converts; those who had a nose for what is in November air should dismount and walk back to the Abbey with himself. He was particularly sure that Winter would be eager to do this.

This evidences of Winter's eagerness were tenuous. He looked at Bussenschutt, it seemed to Appleby, with the economical wariness of one familiar with an antagonist's points and calculating on what hand attack will come.

'Moreover,' said Bussenschutt, 'I have intelligence with which to beguile the way. Intelligence of our colleague Benton.' Bussenschutt, although his remarks were directed to Winter, here beamed with particular geniality on Timmy, as if whimsically admitting this young man to a glimpse of the innocent gossiping of senior common-rooms. 'I fear', he continued, 'that nobody else will be interested' – his glance fell fleetingly on Appleby – 'but perhaps we can raise a third hiker' – he paused to let everyone admire this bold colloquialism – 'all the same.' He opened a door at the back of the car – a masterly stroke the social indecency of which he contrived to cloak by appearing to aim at readier communication with Mrs Moule. 'I trust, my dear lady, that you have good news of

your brother in his magnificent diocese? How much, at Oxford, the Bishop of Udonga is missed by all!’ And at this display of his own superb staff work – as well perhaps as at the sight of Winter and Appleby scrambling from the car – the learned Bussenschutt horridly and triumphantly beamed. ‘*Au revoir,*’ he cried, ‘*arrivederci, auf wiedersehen!*’ He stood with his fishy cap held stiffly in the air – Appleby incongruously saw a uniformed Dethlefs demanding cheers for royalty – until the car had swept round a bend.

Like one who thinks to get over what is not well begun, Winter made for a stile and field-path across the road. ‘About three miles to go,’ he said. ‘Time even for you, Master, to communicate an item of intelligence.’

‘I have had,’ said Bussenschutt consequentially, ‘an adventure.’

The victims of his rape looked at him expectantly.

‘But what,’ asked Bussenschutt theoretically – and he carefully negotiated a cowpat – ‘do we imply by adventure? And may we not pause to inquire whether the idea – the idea of the adventure *per se* – is not something new, and a symptom indeed of our modern malady?’

Appleby saw the point of Winter’s last remark. There was too much reason to apprehend that in the art of gentle talk the younger don was but an imperfect pupil of the elder.

‘And this thought,’ pursued Bussenschutt, ‘is suggested to me by the Benton affair. Adventure of the mind too – the intellectual curiosity on which we pride ourselves: what is this but a product of our inability to live richly in the common context, to seize and exploit the

moment that naturally comes? That satisfaction lies away ahead or far round the corner: this conviction, surely, is a sign of our poverty here and now, our ineptitude' – he waved at the landscape rather as a blind man might gesture round a picture gallery – 'in face of the streaming present... Dear me, I fear I have forgotten by what this interesting train of thought was occasioned.'

'Benton,' said Winter gloomily.

'To be sure, Benton. My point is that the mystery intrigues us because it is something at which we peer from a distance. Solve it – as, by the way, I have done – and one immediately asks; was the effort worth while? One becomes aware, as our friend Eliot must so acutely do in fabricating his romances, that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive.'

Appleby felt disposed to award Bussenschutt the higher mark. In this infuriating accomplishment he had an altogether superior command of tenterhooks.

'You have solved', Winter was saying cautiously, 'a mystery connected with Benton? You are sure you haven't invented it?'

Bussenschutt ignored this. 'I take it, Mr Appleby, that you are not acquainted with Horace Benton?'

'He is a scholar', said Appleby discreetly, 'with whose name I am familiar.'

'Ah, yes; the Codex, no doubt. An unhappy business. But the little problem on which I have been engaged will explain itself to you sufficiently in the solution. Winter, would the solution be of interest to you?... Ah, here we are.'

They had attained a slight eminence from which they now looked down upon Shoon Abbey. Mr Jasper Shoon, as his numerous benefactions emphasized, was a lover of sacred antiquity – and of all that is comprehended in the term it was the eighteenth century, the century of *virtuosi* and *curiosi*, that he loved best. And this dictated the form of the imposing seat the contemplation of which had interrupted Bussenschutt's proposed revelation.

Shoon Abbey was instinct of the eighteenth century – not the Nabob, purse-proud eighteenth century of Palladian façades and broad terraces bespattered with classical statuary *à la mode Winckelmann*, but the polite and lettered eighteenth century of the nascent romantic revival. The enormously costly ruins, the great house with its learned confusion of periods composing a sort of dream-Gothic, the Gardens of Idea – gloomy groves, murmuring streams, sequestered grotts, root-houses, urns, dells, denes, dingles – all these revealed themselves from this height in one extensive, costly, and subtle statement: a yearning after a past age which had yearned after a past age. Bussenschutt's companions surveyed it with an absorbed if somewhat depressed astonishment.

'How much', said Winter – and it was almost the first time Appleby had heard him say a simple thing, 'one prefers Rust.' His gaze settled on Sir Archibald Eliot's great west tower. 'Lord,' he said, adopting the idiom of Rust, 'lord, lord, *lord*.' He turned to Bussenschutt in a gloom which seemed to dispose him to some annihilating stroke. 'You were about to reveal, when Shoon's Folly interrupted us, your startling discovery that Benton used to traffic in arms.'

The stroke wholly miscarried of its effect. 'Arms?' murmured Bussenschutt; 'dear me, no. My discovery concerns nothing of that sort.'

'Then', said Winter with something of the appearance of capitulation, 'what *does* it concern?'

'It is really very subtle.' Bussenschutt paused and once more his companions waited in suspense. He raised his arm and pointed; it became clear that he was referring to the architectural monstrosity before them. 'Antiquarianism within antiquarianism, like Chinese boxes – not an easy thing to achieve. Shoon tells me that he had great difficulty with the architect. The architect *knew* about Gothic. He was reluctant to shed his knowledge and return to the ignorant enthusiasm of the pioneers. But Shoon insistent. And so we have before us a *mélange* of Early English and Perpendicular, of monastic, ecclesiastical, and domestic... Let me see, was not I about to tell you of my discovery with regard to Benton?'

This time Winter strode forward in resolute silence. Appleby kept pace – entertained, but with diminishing hopes of instruction.

'The solution', announced Bussenschutt abruptly, 'is Warter, Wing, Little Limber, Snug.'

Winter stared. 'I beg your pardon?'

'To the approximate rectangle thus demarcated the thing may with fair confidence be pinned down. To narrow it further seems not possible on the purely phonological evidences. But this is very satisfactory. The truth, as you know, has eluded me for years.' Bussenschutt turned in genial explanation to Appleby. 'My concern has been with this Benton's origins. He has a peculiar

accent. On Friday I detected almost identical articulations – unglossed, of course, by a spurious refinement – in a local cab-driver. Subsequent investigation has confirmed me in my conviction. We are tramping Benton's native soil now. But, as I have earlier confessed, the elucidation of mysteries of this sort leaves one a little flat... Stay a moment, gentlemen. I fear we have missed the path.'

There was no need to invite Winter to stay; he had stopped dead in his tracks. 'And is this', he demanded, 'the discovery about Benton with which you undertook to beguile this muddy and boring perambulation?'

Bussenschutt opened eyes of bland astonishment. 'My dear fellow, what other discovery could there be?'

Appleby, meditating the implications of this academic hide-and-seek, again surveyed the scene. They had descended almost to the level of the park and the Abbey was presenting itself, according to the best prescriptions of the Picturesque, in a series of calculated glimpses variously framed. Now to the left was an ornamental water half-circled by an elegant balustrade, with the portico of a little Doric temple nestling in greenery beyond. To the right a waterfall tumbled over a miniature precipice into a deep brown pool; and faintly in the air was the throb of the petrol engine which did the necessary pumping. In the foreground a single gnarled oak had been preserved as a *repoussoir* to the composition beyond; beneath was a crumbling druidic altar with an inscription deeply engraved; a rustic seat was provided for those who wished to pause and read. Bussenschutt sat

down. 'We are certainly somewhat out of our way. That' – he pointed to the altar – 'is an effect wholly unfamiliar to me.'

They read:

THIS SPOT WAS OFTEN
DIGNIFIED BY THE PRESENCE OF
SAMUEL JOHNSON
LL. D.
WHOSE WRITINGS
EXACTLY CONFORMABLE TO THE NICEST
TENETS OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION
GAVE ARDOUR TO VIRTUE AND
CONFIDENCE TO TRUTH

*'And sure th'Eternal Master found
The many talents well employed.'*

'The last line', said Bussenschutt encyclopedically, 'is an adaptation. But one really doubts the propriety of carrying such reconstructions of a past age so far. The altar has so evidently been quarried within the last decade. One would not care to hint anything of the sort to Shoon, but there is undeniably a suggestion of extravagance about the whole conception of his Abbey. It does not altogether join with his scholarly professions.' He stood up, moved on a few paces, leant over the balustrade. 'And you will agree with me that scholarship and extravagance singularly ill accord.'

Perhaps, thought Appleby, Bussenschutt was addressing Winter, Perhaps he was apostrophizing his own uncertain image in the pool below.

Landscape gardening is the art of imposing upon the substance of Nature those principles of composition and balance which painters impose upon her shadow on canvas. The more elaborate sort of landscape gardening aims at the creation of a whole peripatetic picture-gallery. The spectator strolls from view-point to view-point and is rewarded by a series of prospects each of which obey the strictest prescriptions of graphic art. It is a point of elegance if the paths by which this perambulation is made wind through ravines, or between mossy banks or screens of greenery: the sudden vistas and abrupt transitions from shadow to light and light to shadow which it is thus possible to contrive giving the whole experience the added pleasures of contrast and surprise. Of this refined delight the modern world has contrived its own adaptation in those scenic railways or waterways which wind from tableau to tableau through forbidding papiermâché tunnels. In Mr Jasper Shoon's eighteenth century the art was polite and involved: it is recorded of the poet Shenstone that he so assiduously landscape-gardened his grounds as to create, within the limits of an almost miniature estate, many miles of these purposefully wandering paths – the whole being so cunningly planned that one was unaware of the circumscribed character of the territory about which one walked.

Appleby, conducted by Dr Bussenschutt through a similar but more extensive system in

the grounds of Shoon Abbey, reflected that the proceeding bore a symbolical relationship to the curious enquiry in which he was engaged. In the affair of the Spider he had just this sense of a path, itself involved and obscure, affording periodical glimpses now of one and now of another aspect of a single central position. He had a sense, too, that the field was more circumscribed than it seemed; that fragments of the path which appeared remote from one another in the exploring were, in fact, separated only by some impalpable screen, and ready to reveal their neighbourliness at a first inspired application of a good detective's axe. And always in this progress with Bussenschutt and Winter it was the Abbey on which the prospect opened; picture after picture as it presented itself had a growing bulk of fantastically conceived masonry at its core. Appleby, who did not think it necessary always to turn down extralogical processes of mind, felt a growing conviction that the key to what had taken place amid the decencies of Rust would be found to lie in the monstrous creation which was now declaring itself before him.

'I am confirmed', said Bussenschutt, 'in the view that we are making an irregular approach. This aspect of the building – if building be not too prosaic a word for our friend's achievement – is unfamiliar to me. The point would be immaterial did Shoon not seem curiously nervous about the wandering of his guests. It would appear that his benevolence has led him to settle about the estate several unfortunate persons of nervously excitable temper. He is solicitous for our security should we encounter them in an unfortunate mood. But since what lies before us is clearly a

wing of the mansion itself I fancy that we may proceed without apprehension.'

With a deliberation which matched his speech Bussenschutt waved threateningly at an inquisitive peacock and led his companions up a broad gravel path which ended in a flight of steps and an aggressively venerable ivy-covered porch. 'The Gothic', said Bussenschutt, 'looks solemn – an observation made long ago by Keats. One is tempted to add that the pseudo-Gothic looks sinister. Regard that row of traceried windows to the left of the porch. The stained glass will be abominable and the carving wholly without delicacy. But the whole repels me on other, I conceive, than aesthetic grounds. Though not medieval, it is eminently *moyenâgeux*. Or to use an expressive popular meiosis, I don't half like it.'

'It is partly the ivy,' said Winter. 'A building massively overgrown evokes mental traces of witches, robbers, and similar terrors of childhood. And partly it is the singularly deserted appearance of his part of the house.'

'Perhaps', interpolated Appleby, who shared the impression of something forbidding in the scene but who was growing tired of this academic conversational tempo, 'we had better find our way round to the front.'

Bussenschutt held up a decisive hand. 'Witches, robbers, and – you might have added – ferocious animals. But we are children no longer. Before retreating we will at least try the door. A passage may very well communicate with the more familiar apartments.'

They climbed the steps and were swallowed by damp gloom in the porch; a massive nail-studded door beyond yielded to Bussenschutt's hand.

They found themselves in a small lobby with before them a door yet more massive, like something in an illustration to a novel of Scott's. This too opened at a touch and they entered a long raftered hall. There was indeed abominable stained glass, but at each end were large plain windows which flooded the hall with cold, clear light. What was revealed by this could be very concisely described. It was a medieval chapter-house converted to the purposes of a modern boardroom.

Down the stone-flagged floor – which had all the appearance of having been worn smooth by generations of sandalled feet – ran a long solid shiny table, with thirty solid shiny and leathery chairs and thirty leathery blotting-pads and thirty shiny brass ink-pots made out of shell-cases and thirty dull copper ashtrays made out of fifteen neatly bisected hand-grenades. The whole, though it positively suggested nothing more than some modern temple of usury, yet contrived to convey the strongest sense of anticipation, like a curtain rung up upon an empty set or an interior precisely described at the beginning of a fairy-tale.

Their gaze travelled from the long table to the walls. Directly before them, and startlingly set off by the low tones of the stone, was a harshly brilliant picture of the Angels of Mons engaged in Feeding the Guns. Flanking this was a series of enormous aerial photographs of ruined cities, each with a column of technical memoranda attached. And at each end were similar photographs of two buildings still in their original state: one was the British Museum and the other the Library of Congress.

Appleby was contemplating this display with a good deal of satisfaction when he was summoned by Winter to the other end of the room. He found his companions studying an oil-painting by an eminent Royal Academician. It was called 'The Venerable Bede presiding over the building of Shoon Abbey.' One wing of the Abbey was represented as completed – a highly romantic and mouldering affair, with weeds already pushing out from crannies in the ruined cloisters. The other wing was still unfinished – a skeletal structure of steel girders in naked ferro-concrete foundations. In the top left-hand corner was the Venerable Bede in a nimbus, one hand clasping his pioneer work *De Natura Rerum* and the other upheld in a gesture which combined benediction and admiring surprise. Bottom right was Mr Shoon himself, kneeling – by some pardonable confusion of thought – in the attitude of a Donor.

'I suppose', said Winter, 'that if one likes to imagine one's gardens as having been perambulated by Dr Johnson it is logical to go on to believe in the friendly interest of a seventh-century historian in one's bogus thirteenth-century house. But as Bussenschutt has so acutely hinted, one has an uneasy feeling of contact with a dangerously extravagant mind. This next picture is interesting. It appears to be a German equivalent of the Angels of Mons. No doubt the Friends of the Venerable Bede are catholic in their mythological interests. An interesting instance, Master, of syncretism at work.'

It was on this excessively learned note that a door opened and admitted Mr Shoon. The moment was not without embarrassment for his visitors. But Shoon himself was not at all

embarrassed. With a sort of friendly dignity eminently becoming in the owner of a great house he advanced upon Winter and Appleby and exclaimed, 'Welcome to Shoon Abbey!'

'I am afraid', said Winter, 'that we lost our way.'

'And coming in by this door', said Appleby, 'we have been venturing to interest ourselves in the pictures.'

Shoon, nodding in benign approval, contrived to swing himself round towards the photograph of the British Museum. 'What a capital job of work, one must admit, the modern camera can do. At once soothing and inspiring, is it not?' His hand hovered over the foreshortened vista of Smirke's colonnades in a gesture which seemed to gather the whole contents of the Museum into its grasp. 'The brain of England, my dear Mr Appleby; the very cerebral cortex of our culture. Strike at it and what a paralysis would you not effect!' His eye, fixed on certain dots which were perhaps ladies feeding the Museum pigeons, grew abstracted. He turned to the group at large. 'And have you ever reflected on the extent to which the complicated mechanism of our civilization depends upon a few such nerve-centres – is controlled, moreover, by a mere handful of experts? Consider the Imperial Institute of Entomology.'

Mr Shoon's guests, who had not come to the Abbey at all for this purpose, civilly did their best to look like persons who contemplate the institution invoked.

'There we have a scattering of men engaged in the abstruse study of crop and forest pests, of disease-bearing insects. A mere scattering, I say, of unprotected scientists under a single roof!

Nothing would be simpler than to eliminate them.' Shoon's fingers toyed with one of the handsome ink-pots on the long table. 'There could be nothing simpler in the world. And what would be the consequence? In India, six thousand miles away, the death-roll would increase by at least half a million within a year, while the damage to property would be reckoned in hundreds of millions of pounds.' He made a lavish gesture in the air, as if to evoke a vivid apprehension of these enormous figures. 'Or come nearer home. Take London's water supply.'

Bussenschutt, Winter, and Appleby nodded intelligently. They were taking London's water supply.

'To most of us it is simply a matter of turning on a tap. But the water which we thus thoughtlessly command when in town is subjected to over thirty-five thousand laboratory tests yearly. The Eijkman test, the indole-presumptive test, the coli-aerogenes group test, the Voges-Proskauer reaction...all these are constantly necessary. Once more, the handful of experts! Liquidate these and London is at the mercy of *Bacteria coli*, of *Eucrangonyx gracilis*, and of *Niphargus equilex* or the eyeless shrimp.'

Dr Bussenschutt was regarding his host with great respect. A *curioso* and *virtuoso* whose casual conversation comprehended *Eucrangonyx gracilis* and the menace of the eyeless shrimp was a person of extensive views and much observation. 'Your remarks', he said, 'are very striking, very striking indeed.'

The president of the Friends of the Venerable Bede smiled with a mellow brilliance. 'And now', he said, "let me conduct the wanderers to that

part of the house at which they were aiming when so sadly led astray.'

They moved to the door and as they did so Appleby paused firmly before the other aerial photographs. 'It is these', he said, 'which I must confess have particularly interested me.'

Shoon put on the glasses which hung by a broad black ribbon round his neck and surveyed the photograph vaguely. 'These', he said, 'represent work done jointly with the Imperial Academy of Assyriology in Tokio. The Friends of the Venerable Bede have, you will understand, these connexions – the affiliations of learning! Digs, my dear Mr Appleby' – added Shoon, taking off his glasses again and waving them at the photographs – 'digs in Assyria, digs in central Asia. Whole civilizations coming to light.' He paused, sighed and added with extraordinary animation: 'Ruined cities, my dear sir, ruined cities – a wonderful thought!'

Appleby assumed a look of perplexity. 'But, Mr Shoon,' he said, 'look at this one here. There is a little building like a kiosk and the photograph is so clear that you can read the notice: *Aquí se venden cigarros.*'

'*Aquí se venden*–' murmured Shoon perplexedly.

'I think it must be construed as the Spanish for *Cigars sold here*. Surely the Assyrians–'

Shoon's features expressed sudden enlightenment. 'Ah,' he exclaimed, 'I recollect perfectly. This particular excavation was undertaken by a group of Spanish savants. They built themselves quite a little township. But unfortunately it was overthrown by an earthquake. I remember we contributed a

considerable sum in relief. And now, if you will forgive me, I shall lead the way.'

They passed into a long corridor. 'Interesting,' murmured Winter into Appleby's ear. 'Profoundly instructive and I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. But I still invite you to connect up the racketeer in his lair with all that about Rust being Folly Hall.'

'It will link up all right. If only--' He stopped, aware that Shoon had paused and turned round.

'May I say', said Shoon – and his cadence had become peculiarly of the century which he favoured – 'that I cannot be unaware of the profession which has been embraced with such distinction by the brother of Miss Appleby?' He paused with a smile which made the affectation a matter of graceful fun. 'And I am extraordinarily pleased that you have come over today. The truth is that there has been a most unfortunate incident.'

'An incident?' exclaimed Bussenschutt. His voice held the quick suspicion of one who has to keep order among some three hundred young men.

'And, most deplorably, it has been directed against another of my guests of the day. Sir Rupert Eliot. He has been threatened with physical violence.'

Appleby was grinning cheerfully at Winter. 'Dear me,' he murmured.

The owner of Shoon Abbey made to proceed on his way. 'I abhor violence in every form,' he said. 'So you will forgive me if I am a little upset.'

For the purpose of persecuting Rupert the Spider had fallen back on a device unexploited for some time. He had intimated that he Knew All. As everyone was aware that Rupert had a past – that a past, indeed, was his one unchallengeable possession – this was no doubt the obvious line of attack. But the attack contained elements which were far from obvious; which were, on the contrary, oblique and allusive to a pedantic degree.

The two cars – those driven by Archie and Patricia respectively – arrived at the Abbey within five minutes of each other. The visitors were received by their host in a species of entrance hall known for learned reasons as the tribune; in the ceremony Shoon was supported by several Friends of the Venerable Bede, by the now romantically mysterious Horace Benton, and by Horace Benton's colleague Mummery. After formal introductions the women were conducted upstairs by Shoon and recommended to the good offices of a housekeeper; the men were put in charge of Benton and led to a cloakroom. Standards of hospitality at the Abbey were generous; it was understood that the visit was for both luncheon and dinner; settling in was therefore quite an affair. The men discarded coats, hats, scarves, gloves, sticks, umbrellas; the cleanly washed; the vain made passes with hair brushes and straightened ties; everyone then trooped back to the tribune. It was at this point that somebody noticed Sir Rupert Eliot as having emerged apparently equipped for a problematical parlour game. Pinned to his back was an irregular circle of white paper.

Mr Eliot, who in this particular might be supposed to have more acute apprehensions than

others present, was the first to observe that the thing was undoubtedly a spider; Archie Eliot was the first to turn it over and discover the message. It was the message that was so allusive. There was but a single line of typescript, and it read:

Love's Usury, lines 10–11.

On this there was some moments' debate. Mr Eliot rather thought that *Love's Usury* was a play by Farquhar; Sir Archibald Eliot stoutly maintained it to be a poem by Donne. Their host, although a little haziness on a merely seventeenth-century matter could not have been counted to his discredit, appeared slightly vexed at not being able to give a convinced verdict. There was nothing for it but to send for the books.

At Shoon Abbey this was unfortunately a matter of some little difficulty, and in fact most of the time which Bussenschutt, Winter, and Appleby spent wandering through the grounds was employed by the other visitors in the rather awkward business of awaiting light on this latest enigma of the joker's. Donne and Farquhar were available, but contriving an interview was a matter of ceremony. Shoon retired to his study, opened a safe, extracted a bunch of keys, retired to another quarter of the house for the purpose of switching off a burglar-proof device, returned to the tribune, entered a lift, and disappeared. Some ten minutes later he reappeared with a library trolley on which was a little pile of elaborately tooled leather boxes. These opened on elaborately tooled books. The company set to exploring Donne and Farquhar in their rarest and

most ancient forms. It was probably at this juncture that Mr Eliot felt his first misgivings about the Shoon Collection. When scholars have occasion to make references of this kind they commonly do so in unpretentious standard editions; Mr Eliot, a scholar *manqué*, had the nicest sense of such small points of decorum, and it was doubtless this prodigal display of his host's which began in his mind a revolution which was to have the most fateful consequences.

Meanwhile Archie had found *Love's Usury* in Donne without any difficulty. The relevant lines read:

And at next nine

Keep midnight's promise.

This revelation introduced a further awkwardness. Midnight's promise had certainly been murder. And what had been promised for midnight, since it had certainly not occurred at nine o'clock on this the succeeding morning, might fairly be regarded as in store for nine o'clock at night. But all this must be presumed as having no meaning for Shoon, Benton, and anyone else who had not come from Rust. Thus hard upon their arrival at the Abbey the visitors were compelled to offer some account of the disturbances by which they had recently been surrounded. It was while these explanations were in progress that the Spider, whose pace seemed to be briskening, spoke again. And if his first action at the Abbey had been reminiscent of that literary badinage which he had come in his later years to indulge in with his friend the engineer his second action was much more in the spirit of

his earlier and violent days. It was also appropriate to the new environment in which he was operating. The Spider, in fact, loosed off a bomb.

The explosion, though not of shattering violence, was sufficiently alarming. A number of people retreated hastily from the quarter in which they conceived the danger to lie; Timmy Eliot was the first to make a move in the contrary direction. He ran towards the cloakroom – where a glass door could be observed as having been shattered by the concussion – and disappeared within. A shout as of discovery brought others on the scene. In point of sudden shock the effect which the joker had contrived was not altogether incomparable with the affair of the middle black. Rupert had travelled to the Abbey in a vast yellowish overcoat and a bowler hat. These he had hung in a row with other peoples' s wraps – and it was these alone which had been demolished. The bomb – which must have been a miniature affair – had presumably been slipped into a pocket of the coat; in the result this outermost shell of Sir Rupert was ripped to ribbons – and of the bowler hat the brim and crown were discovered in opposite corners of the room. It was a nicely calculated demonstration. Steering with a hair's-breadth of mere futility, it contrived to convey the most macabre suggestion of a threatening violent dissolution. And the threat implicit in the explosion was explicitly restated on a second paper spider which turned up in the course of a rummage among the debris. This read:

It's coming to you, Rupert.

THE SPIDER KNOWS ALL.

Appleby, somewhat bewilderingly transported from those intimations of the higher destructiveness so suavely explained away by Shoon in his boardroom to this petty but efficient petarding among the hats and coats, repeated to himself that it would all link up. Perhaps at some level of his mind not readily available to consciousness it had all linked up already. Or perhaps he was merely enunciating to himself some article of faith. But not only, he told himself, would it all link up; it would also all turn on one cardinal fact. To these scattered events there was a centre: Mr Eliot had really found the joker in possession of an odd insight into his own mind. Amid much mystification this was the mystery. Motive and mechanism, the why and the how, met here. It was this that gave its intellectual interest to a rambling and irregular weekend affair. It was this, too, that Appleby contrived to keep in focus during a curious conversation with Rupert Eliot which followed upon the cloakroom explosion.

The conversation was initiated by Rupert. He led Appleby aside and enquired, 'How's two and two? Have you plumped for four yet, or are you still keeping an open mind on the possibility of three or five?'

'I wish I saw it as simply as that. Perhaps you know more about it than I do.'

They were parading down a long Gothic corridor rather reminiscent of a station hotel. It was gloomy. But even in the gloom Appleby could see Rupert assume his least engaging smile. 'Know about it? I know it ought to be stopped.'

'Before nine tonight?'

Rupert snorted. 'I'm not scared. I've been threatened in my time by more formidable men than Archie. But his foolery ought to be stopped. In other people's houses. It's intolerable.'

'You think that two and two make Sir Archibald?'

'I know' – Rupert combined a further snort with a backward jerk of the head towards the cloakroom – 'that *that* was Archie. Who else would mix up a nasty little infernal machine and rubbish out of Donne, or whoever it is? And Archie won't murder anyone – unless it be Shoon. I needn't shake in my shoes. It's just malicious japing. But it should be dropped on all the same. Damned intolerable foolery.'

'Sir Archibald might murder Shoon?'

'Not really. One gets the trick of talking like a story-book with all this about one. But Archie had a vicious quarrel with Shoon at the end of that west tower business. Over the bill, no doubt.'

'I see.' Halfway down the corridor they had reached the grateful warmth of an enormous log fire and paused before it. 'By the way, Sir Rupert, your own mathematics are pretty cautious. I gather that your two and two give you Sir Archibald only in this particular joke. Perhaps he just sticks his malicious oar in at this point?'

'Perhaps so. There's the fact that the previous jokes were directed against Richard. This one is directed against me. The jokes against Richard failed in their object and I shouldn't be surprised if we've heard the last of them. This joke of Archie's has a different object. Or more probably no object at all.'

Appleby spread out his hands to the blaze. 'I am interested', he said carefully, 'that you think the jokes were after something and have been a failure. Will you tell me of just what you are thinking?'

'My good sir' – Rupert was impatient – 'it's as obvious to you as it is to me. Richard was to be thrown off his rocker. Or alternatively he was to be manoeuvred into the resolution to drop scribbling those rubbishy books – as one heartily wishes he would. And the thing has been a failure simply because he is a stronger and more obstinate man than one would guess.'

'I have thought of that, I admit. Such seems to have been the *object*. But what was the *motive*?' Appleby glanced up from the fire and rapidly answered his own question. 'It was either business or pleasure.'

'Quite so. Either the joker would merely be *pleased* to see the end of the Spider, or he would think to *gain* by it. It's nice' – Rupert grinned wolfishly – 'to be able to keep up with the thought of the police. But I don't know that it's a very helpful line. We should all be *pleased* to see the end of the Spider. But I don't know that any of us would *gain*. I, for one, should *lose*.'

'Indeed?' Appleby was boldly interrogative.

'A delicate matter, my dear Mr Appleby. I have no doubt that it has been explained to you by Archie and others that my circumstances are necessitous. In fact I am maintained by the generosity of my cousin Richard. And what he allows me is two per cent of his royalties. I have his word that I shall always have that – and Richard is monotonously honourable. But I wouldn't swear that he hasn't repented of his

promise since. For me, the passing of the Spider means the passing of a certain income. I hand you all this, of course' – Rupert chuckled delightedly – 'as a defence of myself against the suspicions which I don't doubt you have been harbouring.'

'I'm glad to be handed anything. May I ask if Sir Archibald is in a position similar to yours?'

'He is not. He just extracts what he can from Richard from time to time. And of course he just hates the Spider – that engineer, you know, got right under his skin. I really think he's your best suspect for the tricks – for the whole sorry series of them, after all. For instance, if there weren't the odd fact that he had been drugged, how clearly he would stand out as the one person who could have monkeyed with that picture. When you come to think of it, he may have drugged himself.'

'As it happens, he was seen to do so.'

Rupert jumped. 'Then–'

Appleby shook his head. 'It doesn't greatly help. But drugs reminds me of something. Can you think of anyone concerned, other than Chown, who has a medical training?'

'A *medical* training – do you mean chemicals? Dabbling in explosives?'

'Not at all. I mean actually qualified to practise medicine.'

'The police draw ahead at last. You baffle me. But the answer, I believe, is the little bounder André. He was a doctor until he found there was more money in the Spider.'

'What a lot of people have done that: engineers, doctors, men of the world–'

Rupert frowned. 'Young man, I have been as helpful as I could and need not be repaid by impertinence.'

Appleby apologized cheerfully. 'And I believe,' he said, 'there is one other piece of information which would help. I understand your cousin's habit is to write two novels simultaneously. Was there a companion manuscript to *Murder at Midnight*, do you happen to know?'

'There was. Indeed, there is – locked up in a safe. *Murder at Midnight* has been abandoned, but the other, I suppose, will go on when all this blows over.'

'Do you know the theme – or title?'

'The theme, no; the title, yes. *A Death in the Desert*.'

Appleby shook his head. 'Literary but unilluminating. If it were called, now, *Annihilation at Nine*. Or even *The Corpse in the Cloakroom*.'

'I tell you, there's no mystery about the cloakroom business. I'm convinced it's Archie's joke.'

'I believe you,' said Appleby.

The majority of the Friends of the Friends of the Venerable Bede had departed – presumably after having been addressed by Dr Bussenschutt the evening before. Those who remained seemed disposed to extreme reticence. At luncheon the party from Rust were slightly the more numerous, and it was to them that Shoon directed most of his conversation.

‘I must warn you’, said Shoon, ‘about the Hermit.’ He glanced round gravely and his eye fell particularly on Miss Cavey, as if commerce with anchorites might be supposed peculiarly attractive to her. ‘The poor fellow has been of uncertain temper for years now. When I installed him I doubted if he had a vocation for the contemplative life. And I may fairly claim some experience of hermits.’

There was a moment’s attentive silence. Appleby looked from his host to Rupert Eliot. But he saw neither. What he saw was himself in a school library twenty years before, with his pen in his mouth and both hands turning the pages of an enormous book... Sherlock Holmes had declined to burden his memory with elementary astronomy. Appleby, contemplating the first ray of positive light which had broken in upon the affair of the Spider, thanked his stars for a memory which refused to shed the traditional lumber of a liberal education.

'I doubted, I say, if he was the right man. But he himself was so sure of it – he had failed, he said, at so many things and he was sure he would make a success of meditation. So I put him in. Since then my doubts have been vindicated; he has not been a success. I fear the necessary spiritual qualities have been denied to him.' Shoon assumed a look of growing thoughtfulness which was now familiar to Appleby. 'Sloth is the danger in such a situation – *inner* sloth.' He made an expressive gesture. 'I have, of course, done all I could do help the man. When he has complained about the quality of the herbs and the straw and so forth I have always gone into the matter myself. A hermit on an estate should always be regarded as the direct responsibility of the owner.'

Shoon's guests murmured their approval of this sentiment.

'Finally he complained that his cell was damp. Frankly it *was* damp; one could hardly have a hermit's cell constructed in any other way. But if this miserable man was without such ghostly promptings as would enable him to rise above – nay, to glory in – coughs and cramps, what was one to do? Consider' – and Shoon made a sign that more claret should go round – 'consider the position of an unsuccessful hermit out of employment. The openings are very few. My responsibilities were correspondingly great.'

The guests murmured again and Benton was heard to wish that all employers were so benevolently disposed.

'And so I let him have his way. He has moved from his cell, which was by the river, across to the ruins. Which is why the ruins, I must explain to you, are – so to speak – out of bounds. He is

so touchy that I find it better that we should keep away. It is a pity: the cellarium would be particularly worth your inspection. I find it a little hard myself.' Shoon smiled with suave brilliance at Appleby. 'Ruins are my hobby. But so it is. And I fear the man is now a hermit in no more than name. You may still see him in the distance in devotional attitudes-' He broke off and there was a little silence. The luncheon-table was confronted - chasteningly - with the story of a human failure.

'Alas!' said Shoon, 'I fear he is only *acting* the part.'

'That hermit's cell,' said Bussenschutt to his companions at a corner of the table; 'I have a fancy to bespeak it for Benton. Never did a man look so unsociably disposed.'

Appleby, thus prompted, studied with a good deal of interest the dim-looking scholar who had once peddled arms for Shoon. Benton was certainly glum - as glum as a bankrupt company promoter or a boy who has lost his first mistress. And his glumness at a guess - such analysis is not easy with strangers - was compounded of equal portions of apprehension and anger.

'Moreover,' continued Bussenschutt, 'he was most reluctant to come down to the Abbey. Shoon, I understand, wired him - as also Mummery - a most cordial invitation to inspect this important papyrus shortly after he invited me. But it was only after I telephoned him myself yesterday evening that he agreed to join us.' Amiable and threatening, Bussenschutt peered at Winter. 'Is not that, now, a very strange thing?'

'Odd, no doubt.' Winter was transparently cautious. 'But Benton has been mixed up in certain questionable activities of our host's. He may have been reluctant to renew doubtful communications.'

'Ah!' Bussenschutt was heavily deliberative. 'I had in mind myself rather his curious relationship to Mrs Birdwire. We know how her name disturbed him. He may well have been reluctant to risk a meeting here.'

'Like Winter.'

Appleby had spoken. From now onwards, he was promising himself, a share of the bomb-dropping was going to be his.

'My dear Mr Appleby' – Bussenschutt had turned towards him in cordial surprise – 'can I have mistaken you, or did you say-?'

'When you appeared on the terrace yesterday Winter here identified you all three at once: Shoon conjecturally and yourself and Mrs Birdwire outright. He then retreated hastily into the house. I thought the retreat odd; hitherto Winter had been all for poking about. Hadn't you, Winter?'

'No doubt.'

'So I made what enquiries I could. And I found that when Timmy Eliot first mentioned Mrs Birdwire's name Winter replied with some form of words which distinctly implied that he had never set eyes on her.'

'Interesting,' said Bussenschutt. 'Interesting, indeed. Winter, am I mistaken in thinking that those are almonds at your left hand?'

Winter passed the almonds, glanced at Appleby with a look which contrived to be ironically

impressed. 'So what?' he said.

'It was clear' – Appleby continued to address Bussenschutt – 'that Mrs Birdwire represented a dark page indeed in Winter's past. He couldn't face her. And since we arrived at the Abbey he has been quite pathetically keeping his eye on the middle distance, ready to bolt again should the woman pay Shoon a visit. One feels that intrigue is not his element.' Appleby shook a solemn head.

Winter showed no signs of restiveness under this banter. He drained his glass, nodded resignedly, glanced quickly about the table and said simply: 'I robbed her.'

'*You* robbed her?' Bussenschutt had sat back in his chair in abrupt indignation. 'You mean to say that the burglary which you so brazenly recounted to us the other night–'

'My dear Master!' Winter looked startled. 'You mistake me. In the burglary the good lady was not robbed at all; everything was grotesquely returned to her. I am confessing to a *real* robbery. What I stole is in my room at college at this moment. And it was a robbery with *violence*.'

Bussenschutt glanced across the table. 'I am so sorry for Mummery,' he said. 'How much he would like to be in on all this.'

Winter shook his head. 'I will confess. With Appleby baying on the trail like this it is my only chance. But not in undertones over the remains of Dover sole. You must restrain your impatience.'

With unruffled composure Winter continued his meal.

They retreated, not very sociably, to Bussenschutt's bedroom. Bussenschutt indeed, whose humour it was to regard Winter as a captive, conducted this retreat with such circumstance that at the break up of the luncheon table even an idle eye might have spotted that something was afoot. But the majority of Shoon's guests were being invited to conduct themselves informally round Shoon's pictures; it was unlikely that anyone would be missed until the grand assembly for the purpose of inspecting the Collection later in the afternoon.

'In Aleppo once – ' said Winter, and paused to light his pipe.

Appleby, whom forty-eight hours at Rust Hall had made abnormally sensitive to literary allusions, looked at Winter suspiciously. 'You are sure,' he asked, 'that you are not muddling yourself up with Othello? He made a strikingly similar remark.'

'In Aleppo once,' reiterated Winter unheeding, 'it happened that I ran into this appalling lady. Why I was there I have forgotten, and why she was there I never knew.'

'The inhabitants of that once flourishing city', interpolated Bussenschutt, 'are famous throughout the East for the elegance of their manners. And this, I conceive, might be an attraction – but for which of you I will not venture to say.'

'We met while making the inspection of the aqueduct, the prime antiquity of the district. Mrs Birdwire–'

'Stay!' said Bussenschutt. 'There are some vivid chapters on Aleppo in *Circumcised Dogs*.

But I recall nothing of an encounter with Mr Winter.'

'Mr Winter never revealed his name; it was an irrelevance which the lady's expansive nature crowded off the stage from the first. But our friendship matured with remarkable rapidity. By the time we had finished examining the aqueduct I was being favoured with the sort of racy reminiscences in which you, my dear Master, have been so interestingly soaking yourself during the last few days. We then got into a carriage – a ramshackle but rubber-tyred carriage with which she had contrived to provide herself – and were driven to her house. She had been in Aleppo some months and – what is vital to my story – had come there direct from Greece; I think she was proposing to write a book about Greece in Aleppo, and then a book about Aleppo when she had moved somewhere else. Meanwhile she had made herself uncommonly comfortable; there is any number of stately houses and she had nosed out one which was in excellent repair. I remember walking about the pistachio plantation which surrounded the place and reflecting how surprisingly secluded it was. Without knowing it, I was taking my first step towards crime.'

'The circumstances', said Bussenschutt, 'were favourable and your true nature unfolded.'

'No doubt. But so did Mrs Birdwire's. Why she should have made such a confidant of a casual acquaintance I don't know. There was a further dish of miscellaneous reminiscence – this time of the less publishable sort – and then as our precipitate friendship grew the conversation became more intimate. Drains.'

'To be sure – drains.' Bussenschutt sighed as one who has himself suffered all that another can

recount.

'Mrs Birdwire has many interests, but her master-interest is drains. On this subject her travels have enabled her to make a great number of curious observations. For myself it has no appeal. Doubtless owing wholly to some accident of my nursery environment which Chown would wholly deplore, my attitude to the science of sewerage is entirely negative. Mrs Birdwire on this hobbyhorse bored me, and as I listened I began to wish myself where I was planning to be on the morrow: over that waste of limestone hills by which we were surrounded and on my way to Iskanderoon.... But, as you yourself, Master, recently remarked, how oddly one thing leads to another!'

Bussenschutt frowned rather as if he had been set a puzzle. 'The essential fact about drains is that we dig them. The link is in that.' His frown changed to a complacent smile at his own perspicacity.

'You are very right. Mrs Birdwire, though abundantly learned in every system of sewage-disposal primitive and refined, holds inflexible views on the subject as it may affect herself. Briefly, she believes in the septic tank. The Aleppo house had been equipped in this way: we made an inspection. In Greece a similar convenience had been arranged. And while the tank was being dug in something else – she perfectly casually told me – was dug up. We viewed this too – on my petition. It was' – a childlike gravity, Appleby noted with interest, had descended on Gerald Winter – 'a small antique marble.'

Bussenschutt looked mildly interested. 'Graeco-Roman, no doubt,' he said.

'Not at all.'

'Hellenic?'

'A small *archaic* marble. And the patina – lord knows where the thing had lain – was more perfect than you have ever seen. Mrs Birdwire liked it; she thought it had a nice smile.'

'Oh dear,' said Bussenschutt. 'Oh, dear, dear.'

'It had popped up unexpectedly in the course of laying her beastly little drain, and she regarded it as one might regard a lucky sixpence. People bore holes in lucky sixpences. Mrs Birdwire proposed to bore a hole in her marble.'

'This is bad,' said Bussenschutt; 'very bad indeed. I once saw a Venus of Milo with a clock let into the stomach. But that was only a copy, after all... For what purpose – ?'

'A fishpond. She was planning a little fishpond here at home and she thought that with a good clean-up–'

Bussenschutt, completely at one with his colleague, softly groaned.

'...and a sort of spout put through for a fountain–'

'Enough, Winter! Mr Appleby and I appreciate the situation. You took the marble into your own keeping.'

'Delicately expressed, Master. I stole it. I laid hands on the woman and stole it. Everything conspired to prompt and assist me. She proposed tea and summoned servants. Nobody came. I don't doubt that she had taken half Aleppo into her service as soon as she arrived, but – what I couldn't feel to be other than a dispensation – not a soul was about to answer her bawls. We

made tea ourselves and she explained that it was no doubt the wireless. In those days at least five governments were bombarding that part of the world with the most beguiling programmes money could contrive, and the people of Aleppo are far too courteous to reject such princely free entertainment. So we drank tea and then – for everything, I say, conspired with or against me – nothing would satisfy her but that I should inspect her cellars. I won't swear that in the interest of that marble I wouldn't have consigned the woman to the dankest dungeon. As it happened, nothing of the sort was necessary. Her friend Lady Pike was arriving next day; Lady Pike dislikes heat; Mrs Birdwire had therefore rigged up a very comfortable sitting-room in the heart of the cellarage. I paused only to see that there was a stout door with a bolt on the outside. Then I gave the lady a push.'

'A push?' asked Appleby mildly.

'A push. It is quite remarkable how strong one's gentleman-like prejudices are. I tried to manoeuvre her so that I could simply cut and run, but in the end an unchivalrous push was needed. There is little more to relate. I bagged the marble, went to my hotel and packed, and was on my way to Alexandretta within an hour. There I caught a coasting steamer; I was in Split within three days and in Zagreb the night after. The marble and its unknown purloiner had vanished into Europe.'

'And only now', said Bussenschutt, 'is the criminal unmasked. Unlike Mr Appleby, I have never mingled with the criminal classes before – unless our present host be judged on the fringes of that category – and I confess to finding a good deal of interest in the whole affair. How, Winter,

did you feel afterwards? Was the sight of a policeman in the street not without its alarms? Were there moral compunctions? Did the incident come between you and the aesthetic contemplation of the object of which you had possessed yourself? If the like circumstances arose, would you do it again?’

Winter laughed – a trifle shortly. ‘It was a mistake,’ he said. ‘I admit it.’ He turned towards the window by which Appleby had been standing. ‘You must understand–’

But Appleby was by the window no longer; he had drifted silently to the door. Even as Winter spoke his hand went to the knob, the door swung briskly open, and Sir Archibald Eliot tumbled into the room.

‘Always’, said Appleby, ‘lean back on your heels and face the knob. You can then spot it beginning to turn. If it does, don’t attempt to retreat; you will merely overbalance. Straighten up, knock at the door as it opens, and leave the rest to bluff.’

‘But’, said Archie Eliot – and of those in Bussenschutt’s bedroom it was his equanimity that was least disturbed – ‘I don’t *listen* at keyholes. I *peer*. It’s a mild compulsion neurosis. There’s a learned name for it. Troubled me since my angel infancy. Exceedingly sorry, of course.’

‘Do you mean’ – Winter spoke sharply – ‘that you are generally known to suffer from this – ah – nervous infirmity?’

‘Just that. Can’t be very well hidden, you know; quite often caught out. Embarrassing.’ Archie smiled easily. ‘Humiliating would scarcely be too strong a word, I dare say. But nowadays there is a more sympathetic understanding of that sort of thing. Somebody did the wrong thing

when one was a kid, and here one is. Let's all go and find a drink.'

'Let us rather', said Appleby, 'have a talk.'

Archie sat down on the bed and sighed. 'About the Spider? We'll find no end, in wandering mazes lost.'

'On the contrary' – Appleby was grave – 'the end is substantially in sight. I know, in general terms, why these jokes have taken place.'

'My dear sir, we all know that.' Archie was courteously contemptuous. 'Richard was to be harried out of his wits. Only the joker mistook his man.'

'Richard Eliot', interposed Bussenschutt, 'does appear to be unexpectedly rocky. If this persecution, now, had been directed against a creature like Horace Benton—'

'And I know, again in general terms, why are we all visiting this bogus Abbey. And I am interested in Jasper Shoon; more interested in Shoon than I have been in anyone at Rust Hall – even yourself, Sir Archibald. Now, I believe you have some previous acquaintance with Shoon? Perhaps you can give us an estimate of the man?'

Archie's eye, so recently – if he was to be believed – morbidly exercising itself upon a keyhole, narrowed defensively. 'Acquaintance? I built him a loonie tower.'

'And quarrelled with him afterwards.'

'Yes. But I took care to make it up pretty quick when I found out about him. Mildly put, I grovelled. I've wandered about, you know, and I have pals in some queer trades. I got the tip that Shoon is a dangerous man to cross.'

'Oh, come,' Winter was at the window, staring out at the costly ruins. 'Sinister, perhaps. But dangerous-?' He gave a wave which comprehended all the laborious eccentricity of Shoon Abbey.

Archie turned to Appleby and Bussenschutt. 'Winter', he said, 'believes that one cannot be dangerous if one has piled up about oneself a few literary and antiquarian effects. I wonder.' His face lit up with placid malice. 'For instance, there is that engineer in my cousin's books. You couldn't have a more persistent culture-hound. And yet it is always he who uses a pistol effectively in a tight place. But that's by the way. I was saying that Shoon is dangerous. Behind all his attitudinizing is a powerful, unsrupulous, and able mind. One knows that well enough. But the man is also – it appears – pertinaciously and methodically vengeful... In short, I became friendly again on his own terms.'

'And it was you', asked Appleby casually, 'who arranged this visit?'

Archie grinned. 'I understood you to say that you knew all about the wherefore of this already.' He looked at his watch. 'Presently we are to see the Collection. I am afraid we must break off our little talk. You see' – he moved towards the door – 'I have one or two things' – his finger flicked at the keyhole before he turned the knob – 'to give an eye to before that.'

He was gone.

'A cool card', said Bussenchutt. He considered, appeared to find the colloquialism felicitous. 'A cool card,' he repeated. There was silence in the bedroom. 'Winter, you seem singularly absorbed in Sir Archibald's keyhole.'

Winter smiled. 'It has its interest,' he admitted and walked slowly to the window. 'Appleby, isn't he your man?'

'Archie? So Rupert would persuade me. But my man for what? What is it all about?'

'Malice. The malice of a dependant, developed to a pathological degree. Archie had the instinct for malicious tricks. The trick he played on the Cavey at breakfast. And then André's dogs: you may bet it was Archie who was behind that. And Archie is the *only* person who hadn't an alibi when the Renoir was removed. And he was *seen* to drug himself – you've never answered that. Then consider the literary flavour of the jokes – *Love's Usury*, for instance. Isn't that at least a pointer? And we know that Archie has already lifted from his cousin's books; that he had the cheek to read up skeleton keys in them and pick Richard's cellar. We know too that Archie alone commonly had a peep at the manuscripts—'

Appleby was looking faintly bewildered. 'It is true', he said, 'that to these unconvincing and obvious reflections one or two slightly more congenial may be added. But, even so—'

'What can be added?'

'Well, two points which put Archie ahead of the equally malicious Rupert. If Eliot cracked up and the books stopped Rupert would lose money and Archie not. Or so Rupert tells me, and he is unlikely to be lying. Again, Rupert has an alibi for the first affair of all: the Birdwire burglary. He was in Scotland, or so he says. I'm having that checked up on now, and once more he's probably telling the truth. Archie has no alibi for the burglary. But let me repeat that even adding

these points to your indictment this case with which you have burst out is singularly weak.'

'I conjecture', said Bussenschutt, 'that what has so excited Winter is the keyhole.'

'Exactly! When I have been confronted with puzzles in my own work I have always found that the simplest solution is the likeliest. Now, the real puzzle here is the puzzle of the joker's clairvoyance. Appleby, do you know what was my first vision of Eliot? It was in the train on the way to Rust. He was wandering down a corridor chattering to himself. *He talks aloud* – and is probably quite unaware of the fact.'

'And so the keyhole's the place for secrets. It is certainly simple. Kermode thought of it first, by the way. Kermode and I had a cryptic but obscurely significant conversation. He as good as told me that he was giving me the essential clue if I had the wit to take it. And he told me that the keyhole was the place for secrets. The particular circumstances of our chat made the remark ambiguous, but I needn't go into that. So Eliot murmured his plots and what-not while Archie listened at the door?'

'Just that. It was Archie's guilty conscience, his sense that the incident of a few minutes ago might put us on the track, which made him put across that stuff about his habit being not to listen but to peer.. Then go back to Archie's drugged condition after the Renoir affair. Mrs Moule saw him drug himself. You maintain that her evidence is not particularly important. Why?'

'Why?' Appleby had turned to Bussenschutt rather as one turns with a conundrum to a deserving child.

Bussenschutt beamed. 'I have no knowledge of what you are discussing. But I gather that the terms of the problem are these: a man is found drugged; it is later discovered that he performed this act himself; nevertheless it is maintained that the discovery has little significance. The answer can only be that he is a man who *habitually* drugs himself.'

'Just that.' Appleby chuckled at Winter's sigh of exasperation. 'Mrs Moule wasn't quite observant enough. Archie is constantly taking furtive little doses of lord knows what – the latest elixir of perpetual youth, maybe. It is this that would make it possible for *someone else* to drug him in the particular circumstances of a couple of nights ago. Archie will not take the principal part in a game without fortifying himself with a drink. He will not take a drink without fortifying himself against old age or whatever it may be. Hence any tolerably light-fingered person's chance – a matter of filching one phial, say, and substituting another.'

Winter shook his head. 'That doesn't *prove* that he was drugged by someone else. That he habitually gives himself one sort of pill is no indication at all that he didn't on this occasion give himself another. And now come back to the joker's clairvoyance. The keyhole theory fails to impress you. Is that because you have a more convincing theory of your own?'

Appleby, who for some time had been making all the running, seemed halted by this. 'I have a theory,' he said; 'a difficult theory which I don't yet at all trust. I'd much prefer yours if I could believe it – as, incidentally, I can imagine Belinda doing. She maintains that her father works at his books in a trance-like state – one in which it is

easy to picture him murmuring away and being tapped by an eavesdropper. But it's *too* simple. Eliot is certainly acute enough in his normal state. I mean that if the thing could be solved on your lines he would have solved it himself. For instance, he thought of and rejected your paramnesia notion. If he talks to himself I don't believe he can be ignorant of the fact. And that means that when confronted by this puzzle he would try the adequacy of eavesdropping as a solution. No, I prefer my own line of thought, somewhat tortuous though it be.'

'And it is?'

Appleby grinned. 'I would disappoint you', he said discreetly, 'by bringing it forward at this point. It is too tentative as yet. My picture of the whole case – if case it can be called – is inchoate.' He paused with faint irony on this solemnly learned word. 'And is building itself up in a most irregular way – mostly on impressions of the way people talk.' He began to walk restlessly up and down. 'It's an approach for which there's certainly no lack of material. Shoon's chatter about the eyeless shrimp: it's significant, you know. One sees so clearly the fantasies of destruction which have controlled his career. And so with other people. They are what they are. But when they talk at large one sees what they see themselves as being.'

'These', said Bussenschutt, 'are instructive psychological observations. But they do not quite compensate for your keeping your theory in the dark. As a mere observer of these untoward events I would dearly like to know whom you consider they involve.'

'Possibly someone you haven't met: a man called André I-don't-know-what.'

'André?' said Winter sharply. 'He's malicious enough, at any rate.'

Appleby stood still and decisively shook his head. 'That's where you go wrong at the start. Malice is not essentially in question. We are dealing with a practical joker.'

'Of course we are. But surely—'

'A *practical* joker.'

Horace Benton paced his bedroom.

Like all the bedrooms at the Abbey, this was a period piece. It was lofty, and in whatever direction Benton turned he was confronted with darkly glowing tapestries on the panelled walls. He walked east and faced the story of Procne; he turned on his heel and saw the god coming to Danae in a shower of gold; to his left Europa was being carried off on her bull and on his right stretched a writhing Rape of the Sabines. But by none of these pleasing aids to reflection was Benton at present held. He glowered for a moment at the log fire burning between massive fire-dogs on a spacious hearth. He plumped down on a bed – a resplendent affair carved with hippogriffs and hung with sarcenet – and incontinently rose to pace about once more. In silver candelabra were white lights and yellow lights of three sizes of wax; there was a ewer of silver in a silver basin parcel-gilt; beside the bed were a little collection of illuminated missals, silver pots of beer and wine, manchets, and a chet-loaf of bread. But Benton ignored these minutiae of antiquarian reconstruction. He strode to the window and contemplated the rambling masonry of Jasper Shoon's folly. From his features it might have been conjectured that he would be only too pleased could he believe those proud towers to swift destruction doomed. 'I wish–' said Benton aloud, and checked himself upon a tap at the door.

It was his host. Silvery and distinguished, benign but with the pressure of severe thought about the lines of his mouth, Shoon advanced into the room. He paused in surprise: Benton was muffled in an enormous overcoat. 'My dear fellow, are you proposing a walk?'

Benton looked warily at his former employer. 'I'm going up to town. I have a car coming.'

'To town? But this is a real loss. I hope the absurd explosion did not upset you? There have been vexatious jokes, it appears, at Rust, and now we are being favoured with similar activities here. Be assured there is no cause for apprehension. But perhaps it is a little too like old times?'

'I'm coming back.' Benton made this announcement with gloomy resignation. 'A matter of urgent business in town. I shall be back before dinner. I wish' – he paused and plainly thought better of what he wished – 'I wish I hadn't to go, of course.'

'Kindly spoke, my dear fellow. And I must not keep you from your urgent business this dull Sunday afternoon. Though I had been hoping for your help in entertaining our new guests. I have just been telling them something of the work and aims of the Friends.'

Benton made an inarticulate sound.

'I have been explaining my modest hope that our results may one day be far-reaching and pervasive; may make a very big noise indeed.'

This verbal quibbling, somewhat reminiscent of Milton's fallen angels, appeared to give Benton singularly little pleasure. 'Really,' he said, 'I am very out of touch with all that. I wish–'

'And yet' – Shoon was looking thoughtfully at his distraught companion – 'how necessary it often is to shake hands with one's dead self.'

Benton jumped. 'Really, Shoon – I hardly understand you.'

'I am devoted to the past.' Shoon gestured round the room. 'But not the *immediate* past. Not the past which is able, as they say, to rise up against one. And with people like ourselves that is always liable to happen.' He thrust out a delicate toe and kicked a log on the fire. 'Everything is beautifully secure – and yet one never *quite* knows where one is. You agree?'

'Well, yes – I do. Only–'

'Only you wish this, that, or the other thing.' Shoon smiled without much friendliness. 'And I wish that I were a little clearer as to what is going on. I don't *like* explosions, even when they appear to be wholly the affair of those amiable Eliots. And I don't like to see you being scared away from the Abbey. I mean, of course, without knowing why.'

'I assure you' – Benton was increasingly nervous – 'my expedition has nothing to do with anything that need cause you uneasiness.'

'The past which has risen up against you is not, in fact, *our* past?'

'No. I mean, of course, nothing has risen up against me. The idea is absurd.'

'Miss Appleby's brother, the policeman, is not involved?'

Benton stared. 'I wish I knew what you are talking about. I don't know anything about a policeman.'

'Good. Forgive me. I am not so young as I was, and I sometimes imagine plots. Do you ever feel that you are being plotted against? Not a nice feeling. I have always preferred to do the plotting myself... You had better be off on your errand.'

'My errand?'

'Benton, why not confide in me? Who is packing you off to town in this peremptory way?'

Benton's protestations were cut short by a commanding rap on the door; it opened and revealed Bussenschutt. 'Benton, they say that a car has come for you. I hope you are not deserting our excellent host?'

With an exclamation which might have been the issue either of rage or of mere haste Benton grabbed a hat. 'I have just been telling Shoon that I have to go to town.'

'To town! You astonish me. But you are coming back?'

'I'm coming back.'

Bussenschutt nodded. 'That's capital,' he said. 'Be sure not to change your mind.'

The visit to the Shoon Collection bore, at the time, the appearance of an interlude – of an episode instructive in itself, but divorced from the obscure drama which was working itself out at the Abbey. It was thus that Appleby regarded the inspection while it was in progress; only later did he see that it had its logical place in the preparation of two distinct catastrophes. Unlike Timmy Eliot, Appleby had never collected butterflies; he regarded all intensive efforts at material accumulation as morbid; his thoughts during part of the time were busy elsewhere.

The Collection was accommodated in the Long Gallery, a pleasing feature of Tudor domestic architecture which Shoon had not failed to incorporate in his highly eclectic mansion. Situated where a more economical age would have crammed a multitude of attics, it ran, broad and low, the whole length of the main building, the severity of its proportions gracefully tempered by spacious bays which ran back over the subsidiary wings. The arch-braced roof, with rudely carved collar beams and purlins, was austere medieval in suggestion, but beneath – as was fitting in a great library – all was High Renaissance. Dwarf Corinthian pilasters, each shaft a monolith of white marble engaged in walls of pale green marble veneer, supported the Gothic wall posts on their capitals. The six fireplaces – their electric pipes concealed behind wrought-iron screens by Niccoto Grosso – were triumphs of the glyptic extravagance of the later *cinquecento*: luxuriously intertwined marble hermaphrodites upheld scrolls and shields, straddling and skipping marble *amorini* played tug-of-war with heavy-fruited garlands or hide-and-seek amid a miniature architecture of wriggly pillars and interrupted arches – all the *amorini* equally and inordinately plump, with the sightless upturned eyes which told of their recent emancipation from dull ecclesiastical functions. The candelabra – so Shoon averred – were by Cellini himself. The silver-ware scattered about was by Francesco di Ser Giorgio da Gravedona. The crucifix over the main fireplace was by Cataluzio da Todi. The bookcases were by Baggins and Wragg, but their fireproof metal was sheathed in mellow Italian walnut with carved and gilded cornices, and the steel lattices which guarded their contents were damasked with dull

gold. The carpet was cloth of dusky gold; the occasional furniture was in a lacquer of the palest cream; the books were in a uniform binding of snowy vellum. All in all the Shoon collection was handsomely housed.

The guests went up in batches in a little lift and waited on a rather draughty landing until Shoon came up with the last batch and unlocked the impregnable doors of his library. Mr Eliot's attitude while attending this ceremony, it occurred to Appleby, was rather that of a devout courtier about to be accorded the *grande entrée* to the presence of some absolute monarch of the past.

'You know, John,' he murmured, 'it is really a very fine thing that a man like Shoon, who has undoubtedly emerged from an environment of international intrigue, and who is rumoured still to dabble in arms in a not altogether honourable and patriotic way – it is really rather fine that he should have such an appreciation of the real achievements of civilization.'

'I place consistency among the first of the virtues.'

Mr Eliot's brow clouded. 'No doubt he is rather enigmatic. And I have sometimes been a little uneasy about Belinda. There are aspects of the household which one cannot altogether like... Dear me!' The doors had been thrown open and the splendours within revealed. 'I am afraid it does suggest *money* rather than *books*.'

It suggested a great deal of money. The point was emphasized by Miss Cavey, who was the first to press into Shoon's arcana of culture. 'What a magnificent carpet!' She clapped her hands. The

sound rebounded flatly from the marble walls and clattered amid the rafters.

The party entered – treading diffidently upon the magnificent carpet, casting apologetic sidelong glances at the treasures about the walls. Museums are rendered human by being as public as railway stations; over a great private collection there commonly hangs an atmosphere inimical to anything not securely dead. Shoon's guests, conscious of their own indecent vitality, huddled together in a knot and fell silent.

'And now', said Shoon, briskly advancing to the middle of the floor and assuming the tones and bearing of superior guide-lecturer, 'I will take you straight to what must be of particular interest to us this afternoon.' He led the way into a bay and opened a bookcase. There could be no moment's doubt of what it contained. On thirty-seven immaculate vellum spines there gleamed thirty-seven gilt spiders, their legs delicately poised above thirty-seven variously lurid and cryptic titles. Here, illuminated by Cellini, warmed by Niccoto Grosso, reflected in the chased surfaces of Francesco di Ser Giorgio da Gravedona, was a run of those ephemeral if successful romances which Mr Eliot had fabricated for people as unassuming as himself.

'I had difficulty', said Shoon, carefully taking a volume from the shelf, 'in obtaining a first edition of *The Spider's First Bow*. The dust-wrapper is the great obstacle.' He opened the book in his hand and showed the front and back-strip of the wrapper orthodoxly bound in at the end. 'It was a great day when I finally tracked this down.'

The Spider's First Bow was handed round in an atmosphere of mild embarrassment. Everyone could see that Mr Eliot was disconcerted at this

unexpected introduction to his progeny in an incongruous environment. The incident was one which tact would have passed over rapidly; Rupert Eliot for some reason contrived a heavy pause. 'I think', he said – and his faintly insolent voice commanded the attention of the whole company – 'that Belinda has mentioned that you even sometimes read them?' He pointed a fastidious finger at his cousin's books.

'I *always* read them – and am waiting with the happiest anticipations for the next.' Shoon, who set such evident store on good manners, glanced at Rupert in surprised reproof. 'My favourite' – he seemed to think it necessary to demonstrate that his affirmation was not merely politeness – 'is *Hire and Salary*: I know nothing better than the manner in which the theme of revenge is there worked in.' He proceeded to give a fluent résumé of this particular romance.

'And now', continued Shoon when he had rounded off this episode according to his own standards of urbanity, 'it being unfortunately impossible to review the entire Collection this afternoon I propose that we confine ourselves, ladies and gentlemen, to the corner-stones of English Literature.'

There was a little murmur – of agreement, of applause. Mrs Moule produced a notebook; Miss Cavey began to talk in an undertone about the Brontës; Gib Overall, who had been interrogating Wedge on the price of vellum, became guiltily silent.

That is where I myself began: I determined to have the Corner-stones of English Literature! In 1928 I sold eighteen thousand Dreamworld Cinemas Preferred at a hundred and six point nine and set out after Shakespeare. Thanks to

the Levitski sale in 1929 and the private dispersal of the Smith Collection that followed the scandal in 1931 I had got him – got the *whole* of him – by 1932.’ Shoon moved across the room and halted before an expanse of marble wall. He touched a concealed spring and the marble slid back to reveal a great steel door. ‘Here is Shakespeare,’ he said.

Faintly from the safe as it swung open issued a breath of decay – of decay and aromatic preservative substances mingled; just so, Appleby remembered, does a well-conducted mortuary smell. They looked at the folios – 1623, 1632, 1663, 1664, 1685: they were all there – and at a run of quartos beside. It could not be denied that Shoon, having set out after Shakespeare with the proceeds of eighteen thousand Dreamworld Cinemas Preferred, had got him. Appleby was handed *Shakespeares Sonnets: Never before Imprinted*. In 1609 someone had bought this very copy from John Wright at Christ Church gate, paying fivepence and beginning to read, perhaps, as he took the ferry for *Coriolanus* or *Pericles* at the Globe. And now here was the book sumptuously bound, with Shakespeare’s arms on the front and Shoon’s arms – a hyena rampant – on the back, safe from further chance, change or perusal. Gingerly Appleby opened it: on the title-page a laborious eighteenth-century forger had inscribed ‘Johannes Milton.’ He turned on:

*Not marble, nor the gilded
monuments,*

*Of Princes shall out-live this powrefull
rime,*

*But you shall shine more bright in these
contents*

*That unswept stone, besmeer'd with
sluttish time.*

*When wastefull warre shall Statues
ouer-turne,*

*And broiles roote out the worke of
masonry,*

*Nor Mars his sword, nor warres quick
fire shall burne*

The Living record of your memory...

Shoon held out a politely impatient hand. Shakespeare went back to the safe. And in a minute the guests were staring – as if at the conclusion of a conjuring trick – at a blank marble wall.

‘Early in 1933’, said Shoon, ‘I received confidential intelligence of the approaching Sedunary crash. Within a couple of months I had quietly disposed of two valuable concessions – they concerned the supplying of African labour to large employers in central Arabia – and at the psychological moment I was on Lord Sedunary’s doorstep.’ Shoon smiled in a scholarly way as he made use of this constellation of popular expressions. ‘By buying his entire Milton, Cowper, Byron, and Shelley libraries I was able to form the nucleus of a particularly rich section: English literature and the Voice of Liberty!’

The guests made pleased noises; Shoon led the way across the room and English Literature and the Voice of Liberty were cursorily inspected. There was some little difficulty over keys, for this very valuable section was secured behind a

specially complicated series of grills. Each volume had a bookplate depicting the signing of Magna Carta; one of the less prominent barons in the picture, Mr Eliot was told by his host in a quiet aside, was a Schune.

Then Shoon showed the Coleridge Collection, purchased after his successful flotation of the Medicinal Opium Company (China) Limited, and the Wordsworth Collection, the fruit of the Helvellyn and Skiddaw Garden City Trust. This genetic aspect of his library seemed to fascinate him particularly, and he went on for some time describing its finances and the long series of bankruptcies, alimonies, extinctions, insanities, conflagrations, and irresponsibilities in the great houses of England which had resulted in this important sale and that. His guests, having now for the most part exchanged discomfort for boredom, followed him about in a docile clump. Only here and there stragglers detached themselves to pursue interests of their own.

Appleby, from habit rather than from any feeling of its possible significance, noted the disposition of the party. Rupert Eliot had retired to a deep bay of steel bookcases at the end of the room: he had been given the freedom of Shoon's collection of *Curiosa* and was improving himself on an unrivalled run of the world's improper books. Archie Eliot was also improving himself, but on a more material plane. By dint of a manoeuvring for which Appleby felt a good deal of admiration he had contrived to pocket a fine copy of Keats' *Poems* of 1817 and a first edition in original covers of the *Rubá'iyát of Omar Khayyám*. For the policeman on holiday this presented a nice ethical social problem: Appleby was meditating it when his attention was

attracted to something else. This was the conduct of Gib Overall, who was attempting to master – though with but indifferent success – some obscurely powerful emotional disturbance. Appleby had seen the same symptoms in persons about to indulge in political or ideological demonstration; the chances, he felt, of Mr Eliot's getting his party away from the Abbey without further embarrassing disturbance were on several accounts slight. Perhaps Mr Eliot felt this himself. As he made the grand tour of the Collection he was looking more and more depressed.

Shoon had now conducted his guests from the books to the manuscripts. For some time they looked at manuscripts which were undoubtedly corner-stones. Then they looked at manuscripts which Shoon described as *parerga*: posthumous fragments, false starts, obscene *jeux d'esprit*, unplaceable clippings and snippings – materials which Wedge, a little soured by the contemplation of so many corner-stones all a dead loss to publishers in their day, disrespectfully described as English Literature and the Wastepaper basket. After this they looked at letters.

It was the letters, Appleby was to reflect afterwards, that were definitive; it was the letters that sealed the fate of a great deal of valuable property.

Shoon, it appeared, had three special collections of letters, and nearly all the great names in English literature were represented in each. The collections were of Love Letters, of Last Letters, and of Loan Letters.

Astonishing to see how many of the English poets, philosophers, dramatists, novelists, and essayists had been chronically compelled to go

cadging round among their friends for a loan. Shoon's letters, neatly and handsomely encased in cellophane, were so arranged that one could conveniently make a comparative study of the techniques. It would constitute, Appleby thought, an excellent subject for a thesis (*The Theme of Indigence in English Epistolary Art: 1579–1834*) or a satire (*The Spongy Helicon*) or one of Herbert Chown's clever analyses of the poets in a psychological vocabulary (*Penury and the Literary Lifestyle*). Shoon's guests studied these letters for some time; desperate letters about the rent, despairing letters about confinements and babies and burials, wily letters about money owed by dishonest relatives or conscienceless publishers. There were letters scrawled on the backs of rejected manuscripts, letters painfully printed out in a palsied or feverish hand, letters into which there kept creeping the evidences of a disordered mind, letters a little spoilt from a commercial point of view because here and there a word had been rendered illegible by falling tears. Appleby found a letter in which a great poet, having extracted a loan from a nobleman and hoping to extract more, wrote that he had been so lost in contemplation of the moral beauty of his lordship's act that it had been a long time before he came to an awareness that he himself was the beneficiary.

And then they went on to the Last Letters.

One could make a graph, it seemed to Appleby, of how people faced the thing: here the splendid curve of a full and eager life declining to a whimper; there a tedious and humdrum journeyman'ship in literature rising into some striking gesture of farewell. It all depended, no doubt, on how the bugs went to work. The poet

who had written on the moral beauty of his lordship's act had given the last minutes of his life to composing a begging letter on behalf of an old servant; another had died while in the middle of a long and incoherent letter to the mistress he had deserted thirty years before: here was the unfinished page, with a little splash of ink where the pen had finally dropped from the writer's hand.

These Last Letters, Appleby found, were in his line, held for him a particular and curious charm not unrelated, perhaps, to the charm which keyholes held for Sir Archibald Eliot. It was strange that while Archie's habit would be universally condemned as disreputable one could peer like this at the letters dying men had written to their mistresses and intimate friends and be regarded as behaving in a highly respectable and cultivated way the while... Appleby emerged from these reflections to find that the company had moved on to the Love Letters.

'The Love Letters', said Shoon, 'are so completely representative of English Erotic Correspondence that I venture to predict that their eventual publication will rank as a very considerable contribution ...'

Appleby's attention, again straying, was caught by Gerald Winter. With half an eye on the letters under review, Winter had drifted up to Timmy and Patricia. 'The real Henrys and Eleanors,' he was saying; 'they are no whit less strange, Timmy, than their shadowy brothers and sisters in your father's books.'

'No doubt,' said Timmy. He spoke loudly, apparently with the design of silencing his tutor by drawing general attention to him.

But Winter was not to be put off. 'Sexual appetite – how familiar and comprehensible it is, fleeting and intermittent as almost everything else to which we own! But what you nervously call luv is another and more tricky thing – capable of taking on the strange character of constancy, sometimes of performance. Selecting factors' – and he swept round to include first Patricia and then Appleby in his conversation – 'selective factors, buried deep in the unconscious, make themselves powerfully felt – driving the conscious mind to fantastic choices and exclusions, to unpardonable betrayals and impracticable fidelities. Overall, don't you agree?'

As on the occasion of the baiting of Miss Cavey at the breakfast table, Winter was twisting to the purpose of benevolent diversion matter begun purely in mischief. He had reached out for Overall's attention and was talking his very best.

'The oddity of the process forms the stock-in-trade of two-thirds of the world's imaginative writing. Because a strange woman carries about her a chance trinket that strikes back to some potent fetish of the nursery years one follows her as a pilgrim soul. And the result' – he waved his hand in open amusement at Shoon amid his letters – 'may be the splendours and the humiliations, the sieges, shifts, tediums, entanglements, and tragedies of which our host is now handing round the finest specimens which Dreamworld Cinemas and Medicinal Opium can command.' He took Overall in a friendly way by the arm. 'Incidentally, what about slipping quietly away from this junk and finding a drink?'

The manoeuvre had the reserve of the effect intended. Perhaps because Winter's facile patter seemed actively to add to the horror around him,

perhaps because he saw in Winter's audience the nucleus of an audience for himself, Gib Overall acted. He picked up the letter nearest to hand and waved it. He shouted. He shouted down Shoon's Long Gallery. And Shoon's Long Gallery proved a capital place down which to shout.

He shouted because he was a failure, a scribbler of popular literature which wouldn't even sell. He shouted because he was envious and resentful, and because he was frightened of what would happen to him next – because he was frightened of being even more frightened tomorrow than he was today. He shouted because what Winter had been calling factors buried deep in the unconscious dictated that at this moment and in this way he should make an exhibition of himself. All this was evident and embarrassing. What made Overall's demonstration obscurely impressive was the fact that through his incoherent indignation sounded the voices of Chatterton and Burns, was released all that agony of the artist which Shoon had so efficiently imprisoned in cellophane and velvet and morocco. For a moment this mournful and seedy and unsuccessful person had startlingly infringed his host's expensively acquired monopoly in English Literature and the Voice of Liberty.

It was quickly over. Winter, with tact and a dash of unexpected respect, got Overall away. The guests, manfully ignoring the disturbance, cordially professing the pleasure and edification they had received from the Collection, were shepherded out to the little landing and won the lift in batches. Shoon turned the last key, switched off the lights, secured the outer doors. The best that has been said and thought in

England, ranged behind its lattices, straitened in snowy vellum, guarded by ten thousand Shoon hyenas, slumbered again. Downstairs there was tea – the subdued but subterraneously light-hearted kind which commonly follows a decisively accomplished burial.

'A murder', said Appleby, 'has been arranged.'

Dr Chown, setting down his teacup carefully on a passing tray, contrived to suggest that he was patient only because patience ministered to his own dignity. 'But, my dear – ah – inspector, were you not under that impression last night – and were you not wrong? If anything has been arranged can you be sure that it is not merely yet another violent joke?'

'Very tolerably sure. Jokes will no longer serve. And so we may expect the real thing.'

'But this is most distressing intelligence.' Chown's voice expressed the blindest unconcern. 'Our unfortunate friend Eliot is to be hanged, then, in good earnest?'

Appleby looked at Chown with innocent surprise. 'Eliot? Oh dear me, no. Eliot is quite safe. I can see now that he has been quite safe from the first. His death wouldn't suit our joker at all. What is ahead of us this evening is the murder of someone else.'

'May I ask of whom?'

'Unfortunately I don't know. Sir Rupert, perhaps; he has been as good as promised his quietus at nine sharp. Or it may be any one of the Friends of the Venerable Bede.'

Chown frowned. 'I can only suppose that you are attempting some pleasantry. Do you really

suggest as a logical sequel to the deplorable events we have witnessed at Rust the murder of an obscure associate of our present host here at the Abbey?’

‘A murder has been arranged. I don’t know of whom. But I do know why.’

‘Perhaps you know *by* whom?’

‘Again – unfortunately – no. There are one or two pointers, but they don’t satisfy me.’

Chown’s patience was modulating into attention. ‘I doubt if I have ever heard a more extraordinary claim. You know just what all this is about, but nothing of the identity of the agents concerned?’

‘Just that.’

‘And you think I can help?’

‘Yes. The heart of the mystery is in the joker’s clairvoyance. You had your own explanation of that: you believed Eliot to be playing tricks on himself. But the affair of the middle black–’

Chown gave a curt nod. ‘Quite so. I am the first to admit that it makes my theory difficult to maintain. I can only say that you are welcome to put forward a better.’

‘I have hinted at my theory already. You may remember that on the object of medical hypnosis you were good enough to offer to recommend some books to me?’

‘I do. Though what put hypnotism in your head–’

Appleby smiled.

‘Oh, Gerald Winter put it in my head. He formed the theory that you might be holding Eliot

in some sort of hypnotic thrall. Like the stage hypnotists who make people jump into tubs of water.' Appleby paused in order to let Chown's extreme indignation at this revelation subside. 'But Winter's idea put something else in my head. And when you mentioned books on your subject I hinted that scientists like yourself have other channels of communication besides published books.' Appleby paused again and plunged. 'Eliot has been your patient?'

'You must be aware, my dear sir, that physicians are not in the habit of giving information of that kind.'

'And they don't discuss their patients?'

'They do not.'

'Never?' Appleby raised a hand as Chown was about to protest again. 'Please don't misunderstand me. What is in my mind is this. Your branch of medicine is peculiar in that you have often to deal with the whole intellectual and professional life of your patients. The books you write are full of the activities of your patients – sometimes sketchily reviewed, sometimes narrated and analysed in very great detail. In such works, you are, of course, careful to secure an absolute concealment of identity. But that might not always be possible.'

Chown had sat down on a sofa. 'This', he said, 'is at least an interesting idea. What you are getting at I think I can guess. Go on.'

'Suppose Byron or Scott or Dickens were alive today and came to you for treatment. It would be virtually impossible to write up his case history for publication. Without suppressions and distortions which would impair the scientific value of what you wrote it would be impossible to

prevent the reader from guessing who your patient had really been. So with any very popular writer. So particularly with a popular writer who sticks to one theme or to one character: it would be impossible to publish any extended psychological analysis of such a person without revealing his identity to any reader acute enough to be interested in your sort of work. And this is a dilemma which must often arise.'

'It does.'

'Literary and artistic people – many neurotic or mildly mad – must be among the most interesting of your patients. They bring a great deal of material for study. A writer comes to you and you learn much from reading his books; a painter comes and you go to his studio and apply your analytical technique to his pictures. In the process you create knowledge, and that knowledge it is your duty to disseminate among other workers in your own field. You achieve this principally by means of communications to learned journals – journals which are not read by a general public. Still, most of such journals are available to anyone who has the curiosity to go after them. And it is likely, therefore, that as a profession you are likely to evolve other and more private channels of communication. One can imagine – '

'What one can imagine', said Chown, 'is – as any psychologist will tell you – quite remarkable.'

'No doubt. Turn, then, to another point. Let us imagine that Eliot has been your patient. And let us, if we may, admit a piece of positive knowledge: that you practise the comparatively rare science of medical hypnotism. You would be interested in Eliot's work; it would afford the key to his mental life. You would use your technique

to get at many aspects of it which were not freely available to his own normal consciousness. Plans and projects, details of actions and episodes thought of and rejected or deferred – all these would come within the scope of your study. And, as much of your investigation would be conducted with the patient hypnotically controlled, it is possible to suppose that he might have in the end very little notion of what he had communicated to you. In a word, you are yourself far the most likely suspect in this whole matter of the joker's clairvoyance. As to this I have no doubt that you will agree with me at once.'

Chown looked from Appleby to Shoon's eddying party in the middle distance. 'Do you drink?' he asked.

'Not noticeably.'

'It occurred to me that it might be intemperance which has brought you to your curious profession. I am inclined to think that your intelligence might make a not altogether negligible mark in the sciences.'

'The point', said Appleby, not pausing to acknowledge this measured compliment, 'is the likelihood of your having made some inadvertent disclosure about Eliot. Articles in a journal in which his identity was not quite adequately concealed from some unusually acute reader. Some privately printed paper circulated to colleagues in which the same condition obtained. Conversations or consultations protected by rules of professional secrecy which somebody unknown has violated. If one could believe there were grounds for supposing something of the sort it might be possible to set about bringing the thing home to an individual. Perhaps it is worth

remarking that the man they call André might have access to medical sources of information... You will now understand what I mean by saying that I think you might be able to help.'

For a moment Chown appeared irresolute. 'I am opposed in principle', he said, 'to interrogation of this kind in the supposed interest of law or justice or anything of the sort. The direct preservation of life is another matter. Before saying anything whatever about my conduct of a patient's affairs I expect the clearest proof of urgency.' Chown, a compound of pomposity, wariness and intelligence, looked at Appleby with great severity.

'Quite so. It is why I began by saying that a murder has been arranged.'

'A murder by someone unknown, of you don't know whom. Really, Mr Appleby, it is a most unconvincing position. You have *no* preference for a victim?'

'I have one fragmentary indication. It may be a mere freak of my own mind. The evidence, such as it is, might be called etymological.'

Chown looked as if he were about to reiterate his question about drink. Instead he said, 'My Appleby, I suppose you understand the meaning of words?'

'Sufficiently for my purpose. And now what, if anything, are you going to tell me?'

'Nothing at all.'

'You won't reconsider that?'

'I will tell you nothing for the simple reason that there is nothing to tell. The structure you have been building is not, like Winter's, a pack of

nonsense. It just happens that there is nothing in it.'

'You have never' – Appleby was insistent – 'discussed Eliot even with trusted colleagues?'

'On that I do not consider it necessary to be explicit. You must simply take my word that your theory is untenable. In fact' – Chown deviated into unexpected humour – 'you and I, Mr Appleby, are all square. And I shall be interested to see how you proceed.'

'For a few more hours', said Appleby soberly, 'we must wait upon the event.'

They had been talking in the seclusion of a deep window recess of the large room in which Shoon's guests were being given tea. Now they both looked out. Over the rambling fantasy of Shoon Abbey the first folds of twilight were beginning to fall.

Timmy and Patricia wandered in the Chinese Garden. Surrounding them was a prospect – as Shoon liked to put it – worthy the pencil of the great Salvator Rosa himself. Down a stony ravine, destitute of vegetation save for here and there a cactus and the blasted remains of a writhing or stunted tree, ran a shallow, turbulent stream, which broke in little crescents of foam now over a rusted and barbarically wrought shield or helmet, now over the skull or thigh-bone of a horse. A rude stone bridge had been half demolished by gunpowder – a Chinese invention in which Shoon had a peculiar interest – and near by was a clear still pool at the bottom of which could be seen the skeleton of a woman with a baby. A rack, a wheel, and other instruments of torture were disposed at intervals along the gorge, and the simulacra of numerous desiccated human bodies

depended from gibbets near the top. On a rustic seat commanding a view of all this was one of Shoon's nicely cadenced inscriptions. It explained that the scene was intended to suggest savage desolation and horror, and to evoke gloomy and surprising thoughts.

'Quite orthodox eighteenth-century *chinoiserie*', said Patricia. She spoke in the slightly defensive tone which she found it necessary to use at the Abbey.

'I do think this Shoon is an awful man.' Timmy peered down into the pool. 'Do you know that somebody – it must be that awful Hugo – has told him that I write verse? And that he has asked me to run up a few trifles?'

'How awful.'

Timmy looked at Patricia suspiciously. 'Apparently he has a printing press–'

'The Shoon Abbey Press. A great affair in the basement.'

'No doubt. There is to be an inspection of *that* before dinner. And he likes to print off complimentary verses for any females present. The type, he says, stands ready set up; the ladies are induced to ask that the press be set in motion; one touches a lever and – lo and behold! – the trifle is before them. There are delighted exclamations.' Timmy gave what was meant to be one of Shoon's suave gestures. 'Did you ever hear such rot.'

'What did you say?'

'I said that it was charming and a very happy notion. That's the worst of being well brought up. So then he asked me to do him his trifles. He even had the cheek to give me a sort of pattern

of his own to work by. The graceful fair – that sort of thing.'

'The graceful fair?'

'Yes. It went like this:

*The graceful fair, who deigns to shower
Her smiles on Shoonium's mould'ring
tower,
Shall read her praise in every clime
Where types can speak or poets rhyme.*

One couldn't forget it, could one?'

Patricia laughed. 'Well, I haven't. It's by Horace Walpole. Adapted of course. Jasper is keen on adaptations.'

Timmy looked about the Chinese Garden with all the gloom it could be expected to evoke. 'How learned you are, Patricia. Winter would say your proper place was in the poetry of Lord Tennyson. You know, I'm coming to think Winter is a bit of an ass. Do you think I must do the trifles? With more murder and sudden death promised it seems a wanton fiddling.'

'I think you better had; it will be only civil... But come and see the ruins. It will be dark in half an hour.'

They climbed out of the miniature ravine in which the Chinese Garden was set. Presently the ruins were before them. 'Hold on', said Patricia. 'There's the Hermit.'

The Hermit, in a coarse grey gown and with a little book in his hands, was pacing meditatively up and down before a long line of Norman arches on the near side of the ruins – no doubt the

cellarium. At each end of his walk he paused for some moments in a devotional attitude. The effect was curiously like that of sentry-go.

'He does look rather trade-fallen, doesn't he?' said Timmy; for the Hermit, though correct in his behaviour, was decidedly more pursy and alcoholic than an anchorite may respectably be. 'Let's go and talk to him.'

'Well,' said Patricia, 'it is what Jasper calls out of bounds.'

'Oh, rot.' That there is such a thing as discreet observance of the behests of an employer was not a notion which would lodge readily in Timmy's mind. 'You needn't', he lucklessly added, 'be scared.'

Patricia, once more darkly reflecting on the Eliots in their character as Barbary apes, tilted her chin and strode forward. When they were a little more than halfway the Hermit caught sight of them. He knelt in prayer.

'What absolute--' Timmy's exclamation was cut short by the unexpected sight of his father. Mr Eliot – or rather Mr Eliot's head – had appeared with infinite caution from behind a fragment of masonry at the Hermit's rear; he made a rapid survey of the ground before him, bolted sharply for another place of concealment farther on, and was immediately lost in the advancing shades of evening.

Timmy and Patricia, who had been unwittingly useful in focusing the Hermit's attention, looked at each other rather blankly. 'What an extraordinary thing,' said Timmy. 'Though daddy does amuse himself at times with playing boy scouts. As I gather Chown thinks, he is a child at heart. What is this ruins business anyway?'

'The cellarium? Belinda and I have always supposed it to be a laboratory in a quiet way. Trying out explosive formulas they've bribed or stolen from other people – that sort of thing.'

'I say, you do take your proximity to this scandalous racket coolly.'

'I keep away and get on with my own stuff. It's you who are all for proximity at the moment.'

'Quite true. And come on.' Timmy grabbed Patricia's arm and advanced farther. The Hermit abandoned prayer and began to thump himself with an ugly-looking flint and to bang his head on the ground. Timmy paused doubtfully. 'Patricia, don't you think he's really and sincerely mortifying himself and all that? It *would* rather be gatecrashing if he were.'

'I'm quite sure he's not. It's just Jasper's little joke. You needn't be scared.'

They went on. When they were within fifteen yards the Hermit abrupted his penitential proceedings and turned towards them. 'Bundle off!' he shouted.

They stopped.

'D'you hear?' bawled the Hermit. 'Bundle off, you young bastards, if you don't want a kick on the ruddy rump.' He advanced brandishing his chunk of flint menacingly.

'What an awful man,' said Timmy. He looked, Patricia thought, not much less belligerent than the Hermit himself. It seemed likely that once more the cloistral calm of Shoon Abbey would be most shockingly disturbed.

But at this moment there came a diversion. Jasper Shoon himself emerged from the cellarium. 'My dear young friends,' he said

advancing and taking each firmly by an arm, 'the evening air here is not altogether wholesome.' He led them back to the house. On the terrace they paused and from this discreet distance surveyed the interesting ruins anew; in the half-light they were beginning to look convincingly venerable.

'I cannot tell you', said Shoon, 'what the past means to me.' He paused meditatively. 'You know, nothing would please me better than the present *becoming* the past rather more quickly than it commonly does.'

Appleby, wandering the Abbey in quest of Shoon's Zoffanys, was halted by the melodiously upraised voice of Peter Holme. 'I shouldn't if I were you,' Holme was saying. 'Really better not. It's the sort of thing that sounds all right in the book, or pleases an audience well enough in good stout melodrama. But in real life, no. Much more embarrassment than satisfaction, I'm sure. Or at least wait until you get back to Rust. Surely a horse-whipping should be a strictly domestic affair.'

There was an inarticulate murmur in reply; Appleby turned into the tribune and found that the person being thus oddly exhorted by Holme was Sir Rupert Eliot. And Rupert was indeed brandishing a whip in a most ferocious manner.

'Appleby' – Holme was lounging gracefully on a sofa – 'do add your entreaties to mine. Eliot here has been handed the black spot again – how much I have always wanted to play in *Treasure Island!* – and seems determined to beat up his cousin as a result. I am doing my utmost' – Holme stretched himself lazily – 'my very utmost to prevent it. For one thing, our nerves are all too

frayed. I just don't want to hear Archie Eliot yelp. Another time, conceivably yes; before dinner and after that dreary Collection, no. Intervene, I beg.'

'The black spot?' Appleby turned to Rupert. 'Another warning?'

'Another piece of damned foolery.' With the point of his whip Rupert pointed at a fragment of crumpled newspaper on a table. 'Shied at me as I was walking down the corridor. I tell you, a good hiding is what the little swine wants. I admit that the proper place of execution would be a public lavatory. But Shoon's beastly Abbey comes to much the same thing.'

Holme smoothed out the missile; it proved to be a fragment torn from a Sunday paper and was about six inches square. 'After that young bomb', he said, 'it seems distinctly an anticlimax. Even supposing it is Sir Archibald, do you really think you must reply with a whip? What about a drawing-pin on his chair at dinner? Or a particularly tempting sweet filled with ink?'

Rupert snorted. 'Give it to Appleby,' he said. 'Let him use his blasted snooping eyes.'

Without resentment Appleby used his eyes. The fragment had been torn roughly from a page of advertisements. 'Bargains at a Regent Street shop,' he said; 'there seems nothing particularly insulting – nor yet sinister – in that.' He turned over. 'Sailings for New Zealand. Hardly significant either... I see.' He passed the paper back to Holme. 'The joker was simply after a figure. The *Begonia* sails on the ninth of December. And found the figure nine, therefore, a lightly sketched spider. Reticent indeed.' He smiled cheerfully at Rupert. 'As I murmured before, *Annihilation at Nine*. Or *The Clock Strikes* – with

emphasis on the final word.' He glanced at his watch. 'Sir Rupert, have you made a will? You have just under three hours to live.'

Holme was staring at Appleby in mild astonishment. Rupert's indignation was such that it took him a moment to command the power of speech. 'If you showed the least sign of making yourself useful', he said, 'we might for a day or two tolerate you about. But your sense of humour quite fails to please.' He snorted again. 'Do you really think I'm scared?'

'I think you're moving that way.'

'Pah! I tell you I've sampled most of the more dangerous sorts of humanity, and Archie's kind isn't among them.'

'Your confidence that your persecutor is Sir Archibald is really uncommonly interesting – chiefly because it is almost completely without a rational basis. Has it occurred to you, I wonder, that it is closely related to your cousin Richard's conviction some time ago that he was the victim of a sort of kink in the universe? He clung to that notion because he was a bit scared. And now here are you clinging to the notion that it is Archie who is after you.' Appleby was speaking forcibly and brusquely. 'While all the time a much likelier person is Shoon.'

Peter Holme whistled: the sound mingled with the clatter of Rupert's whip as it fell to the floor. He stooped to retrieve it; straightened up again with a face drained of colour. 'What the devil do you mean?'

'A murder has been arranged.' Appleby made the statement less soberly than formerly to Chown. 'That is my refrain for the rest of this evening. And I assure you that I am really

beginning to see that the victim may very well be yourself.'

Rupert's confidence was plainly wavering. 'You've taken leave of your senses,' he said shortly.

'And as a likely murderer I would pick first on our present host. You know the sort of life he led before he came out on top of his racket and set up as a professional eighteenth-century racket? You know that he as good as professes a set philosophy of destruction? A dangerous man, Sir Rupert – so beware!'

Peter Holme, still sprawled on his sofa, was plainly undecided as to whether Appleby's flamboyance or its effect on Rupert was the oddest part of all this. 'Well, well,' he said, 'if the plot doesn't thicken.'

'Are you talking plots here too?' Belinda had come into the room. She looked curiously from Rupert to Appleby. 'John, I think daddy really has taken leave of his senses at last. Guess what he's been doing.'

Appleby shook his head. 'I have quite enough guessing on hand – and so has Sir Rupert. Out with it.'

'He's been discussing the plot of one of his books with Jasper.'

'He's been *what*?' Rupert, staring gloomily into the fire, had swung sharply round.

'Arguing about just what happened in *Grand Tarantula*. They've even made a bet on it. Nothing so odd has ever happened before. I've never known daddy do other than shy off discussion of any of the old books. And it's

stranger because I believe he has decided not at all to like Jasper. He even disparages his pigs.'

'Dear me. I can't really imagine your father disparaging anything. He's much too amiable.' Appleby shook a bewildered head.

Belinda laughed. 'But yes. He tells me he's taken a secret prowling round the Tamworths, and that they won't do. They lack finish. Like Peter in drawing-room comedy.'

Holme sighed softly. 'It's too much. Mystery. Dark speeches. And now people being rude again.' He lounged to his feet. 'To hard words I am resigned. But I do think it time the mystery was cleared up. It's becoming as lowering as a record run of Eliot-cum-Moule.'

'You won't have long to wait.' Appleby too had got to his feet and was looking at the clock. 'The point of maximum obfuscation has been reached.' He turned from Holme to Rupert. 'The sands are running out.' His glance travelled on to Belinda. 'And the crisis, Belinda, has been announced by you.'

PART FOUR

A Death in the Desert

Evening, like a gallant enfolding his lady in some fine-spun shawl of Kashmir or Ispahan, dropped its shadows over England. At Rust in the apartments of Mrs Timothy Eliot, where time stood so strangely still, the sun retreated from its diurnal vain assault and Mrs Jenkins, lighting the lamps and bringing out the tatting, prepared for her mistress the restrained entertainment of a Victorian night. The shutters were up in Snug and Warter; in Low Swaffham it was time to open the Five Mows of Barley; around the church at Wing the Martyrs slipped from their torments with a yawn and a stretch, the Fathers laid down their pens and idled, heaven and hell blended and faded, Judgement was suspended until the dawn. Mrs Birdwire's Zulus, building the little camp-fire which was allowed them as a Sunday treat, mingled their strange exclaiming music with the growls of the unslumbering La Hacienda dogs; Horace Benton, overtaken by the skirts of darkness on the London road, leant back in his hired limousine and gave himself to the building up of vengeful and sadistic fantasies about Dr Bussenschutt. On these and on the temperance institute at Pigg, on Caedmon's Cowshed at Little Limber and on the blanket-factory at King's Cleve, the deepening twilight fell. One further heave eastwards and rural England would be in bed, drawing about itself an eiderdown of stars.

Dusk was over the Shoon Abbey. The sun, for a last moment touching the tip of the west tower

like a pennant on an admiral's staff, had expanded its last weak beams on air. About the broken buttresses and bogus tombs the shadows were darkening. The glimmer of the ornamental waters which wound in the exactest taste about the estate was fading on the sight. A browner horror possessed the groves, the grotts, and the Gardens of Idea. At no hour was Jasper Shoons fantasy more impressive. For the Abbey – in this unlike the lady in Gilbert's song – looked its most venerable in the dusk with the light behind it.

Within, this glide of England towards the cone of night was apprehended in a glance at a watch or in the sound, caught amid a hum of talk, of the chiming hour. Seven o'clock was treading hard upon the heels of six; nine o'clock must come. And at nine o'clock there might be another hoax as ingeniously alarming as the affair of the middle black; there might be this or there might be some less harmless variation of the Spider's theme. According to Appleby a murder had been arranged – nothing less. And Gerald Winter, contemplating the party which was now drifting about the Abbey as it had drifted about Rust, reflected on this expectation with both a troubled and a puzzled mind. In the beginning the affair of the Spider had seemed to him a joke, and as the affair developed he had been reluctant to shed the conviction that basically it remained just that. The episode of the middle black had been a joke of an effective if brutal kind; the subsequent threats against Rupert Eliot had all the appearance of being the same sort of thing. Try as he might he could see nothing but a malicious japing, desultory in its methods and random in its choice of victim, in what had occurred. To this, murder seemed the unlikeliest of sequels. And yet here was Appleby preparing for murder with

an unnerving mixture of confidence and professional indifference – rather like a busy obstetrician looking forward to a normal delivery.

All unconsciously, Winter frowned with something of Kermode's ferocity at Miss Cavey... *Not* with indifference. In Appleby's attitude within the last hour or so there could be detected what was definitely satisfaction. That he really believed that murder was to be attempted Winter was convinced; that he was not altogether confident of his ability to prevent the attempt Winter shrewdly suspected; nevertheless he had the air of one who waits for the spin of a coin on the satisfactory basis of heads I win and tails you lose. Winter, who had formed the opinion that Appleby was by no means an irresponsible person, was bewildered and in some suspense.

Everywhere the hum of talk. Presently there was to be another boring inspection of the resources of the Abbey, and after this there was to be a supper before the Rust contingent departed. But at the moment there was conversation. The remaining Friends of the Venerable Bede, who had not mixed too well at first with the forces of the Spider, were now being affable and indeed discreetly instructive. A large man, who turned out to be a microchemist, had delighted Mrs Moule by taking her away and showing her an experiment on so small a scale as to be totally invisible; one of his colleagues, who dealt – in Shoon's phrase – in much more extensive effects, was entertaining Hugo Toplady with a discussion of some topic the cataclysmic nature of which might be guessed at from the violent gestures with which it was illustrated. Everyone seemed tolerably at ease except Rupert Eliot; his eyes were straying frequently to the

clock, and once Winter was startled to see Appleby shake his head at him in a particularly portentous and foreboding way: Appleby, who denied the significance of mere malice in whatever mystery was going forward, seemed to be engaged in the quiet practice of it himself.

Talk. It had been going on for days. He had contributed more than his fair share himself. But now it seemed to Winter like a meaningless music issuing from a wireless-set – listened to only because at any moment it may be faded out for some curt announcement of crisis or catastrophe. It was with vague irritation that he observed Appleby himself as having joined the chatterers. In a remote corner of the tribune he had been for some time in sustained colloquy with Bussenschutt. These two had now been joined by Mr Eliot, and the conversation was clearly as brisk as it affected to be idle.

'It was remarked by Aristotle', said Dr Bussenschutt, 'that nothing more certainly promotes clear thinking than to have hold of the right end of the stick from the start. In considering an action or series of actions let us always begin by asking: "*To what does this conduce?*"' Bussenschutt beamed on Appleby and Mr Eliot alike. 'A commonplace reflection, but I am moved to it by considering that it must be the grand principle of each of your professions.'

Mr Eliot, although disposed to some absence of mind, nodded his head in agreement. It was evident that he approved of the conversation of Bussenschutt, finding it as fluent as Winter's but with less unacademic levity. 'Yes,' he said, 'when one knows the goal to which things are moving one is at once much surer of one's ground.' He

stared absently once more at one of Shoon's magnificent log fires.

Appleby nodded. 'To know the agent and his mechanism while remaining in the dark as to his motive can be disconcerting. But on the other hand to have hold only of that part of the stick which is labelled *motive* can be very disconcerting too. In either case action is difficult.'

'In your responses to my observation', said Bussenschutt – and it was disturbing, Appleby reflected, to note how swifly intelligent the cold blue eye which brooded above his ponderous manner of utterance – 'I am conscious of undercurrents of hidden meaning. A cryptic element which it is a temptation to probe.'

Mr Eliot laughed a shade nervously. 'If our talk is cryptic let us break off – as indeed we must presently do to inspect the Shoon Press. You speak of my profession. In my sort of story nothing is more tedious than prolonged dark talk. It is a matter of good manners, I suppose. For one's characters to converse together – even to fence together – in a mysteriously understanding way while the reader must stand excluded in a corner is really rather boorish.' He sighed. 'I sometimes fail to detect such little discourtesies until my proofs come to me paged up. It used to be difficult to persuade Wedge of the necessity of alteration. Not that Wedge is not a capital fellow and most liberal in matters of expense. But once a book is put in production there is a time-table. He sets great store on the time-table and I have no doubt he is right.' Mr Eliot, sunk in the recesses of an enormous chair, seemed disposed to vague communicativeness. 'I would not disoblige Wedge in any way. That is why I mean to fulfil my present contract. Three more novels

and the Spider – in what I believe is Timmy's favourite phrase – will be led into the wings.'

'Alas!' said Bussenschutt. 'Such a decision will eclipse the gaiety of nations.'

'It will be relief to the children. And I believe to myself. These jokes in which we have all been involved affected me for a time very oddly. They would not have done so, I am convinced, if I had been quite happy about the books – about their whole tenor. I confess to you, Dr Bussenschutt, that I have come to be uneasy about their morality. They are full of violence and of ingeniously contrived and concealed crimes. I am brought to ask, in your own phrase: "*To what does this conduce?*" Certainly not to edification.'

'My dear sir,' interrupted Bussenschutt, 'this is too—'

'I know that they may be held to be innocently recreative. But can one be certain that they are only that? May they not conduce to actual violence and ruthlessness – which are already the nightmares of the modern world?'

'Chown—' Appleby began.

'Yes, John, I know.' Mr Eliot had interrupted with an impatient gesture. 'Such yarns as mine help people to indulge impulses of violence and destructiveness in a vicarious and harmless fashion. But I have reasons – I have the most intimate reasons – for supposing that the thing may act in a directly contrary way...' He looked thoughtfully at his companions. 'Archie's conduct', he added quickly, 'has disturbed me very much.'

Bussenschutt got decorously but reluctantly to his feet. 'I must see if my colleague Benton has returned from his mysterious dash to town.'

'My dear Bussenschutt, please do not go. As one who professes moral science you must expect from time to time to be burdened with other people's ethical problems. I was merely going to remark that my cousin Archie – who is one of the best fellows in the world – has been – if only in the most trivial way – directly corrupted by my imaginings. It so happens that Archie's character is not quite so strong as is his taste for claret.'

Bussenschutt sat down again. 'In this', he said, 'which of us can be sure of escaping judgement.'

'And he actually learnt from one of my books the technique for picking the lock of my own cellar. I abundantly agree' – for Bussenschutt was evincing dignified amusement – 'that the incident is best viewed in a humorous light. But consider what it suggests. My stories are full of laboriously thought-out criminal expedients. Can I be certain – can I be any more certain than our host Shoon – that I am not placing weapons in dangerous hands? John, do you not agree?'

Appleby reflected. 'I remember just two instances of an actual criminal attempting to use methods drawn from your sort of book. And in each case the attempt was his undoing. Had he gone about his job in his own way he might have pulled it off. As it was, he came a cropper. Your fears seem to me greatly exaggerated.'

'But they cannot but have some basis. And I have been so conscious of this for some years that I have been pitching my crimes of violence in more and more unlikely spots. Wedge begins to complain of it. *The Trapdoor*, for instance. There is murder in that, but the technique would be feasible only within the Antarctic circle. If anyone were to get a hint for murder out of my

more recent books he would first have to get his victim into an uncommonly unlikely environment. But the truth is that I have learnt enough from Chown to believe that these scruples are really the product of boredom. I am really feeling disposed – indeed I have already made my dispositions – for a big mop up. And then I shall develop other interests which twenty years of authorship have rather starved.’ Mr Eliot stretched himself with a luxurious gesture reminiscent of Timmy and stared with a good deal of complacency into the fire.

‘Perhaps’, said Bussenschutt idly, ‘you will turn bibliophil like our friend Shoon?’

Mr Eliot looked oddly startled. ‘Dear me, no. I am thinking of nothing like that.’ He got to his feet. ‘Contrariwise, as Tweedledum said.’

The incident of the Shoon Press, effective in itself, was rendered additionally striking by the setting in which it took place. There was something funereal about the descent into the bowels of the Abbey which the inspection entailed; there was something more than funereal in the sequence of underground chambers and passages through which the party had to pass. For it was here that the Gothic side of Jasper Shoon’s fancy had played most at large, and all those devices of terror and astonishment with which the writers of horrid fiction in the eighteenth century had equipped their catacombs and caves and castles were here ranged for the delectation of visitors to the Abbey. Unwittingly as one passed down the gloomy corridors one’s feet pressed on hidden springs – with the result that chains clanked, gaunt hands thrust themselves from dungeon-like apertures,

skeletons erected themselves and made mystic gestures with their arms or a forbidding champing with their jaws, sheeted ghosts flitted amid the shadows ahead, panels opened in the living rock from which the passages were hewn and subjected one to the scrutiny of unnaturally glaring eyes, voices piteously groaned from grated pits beneath the feet, or cried out in a dismal and surprising manner as from the recesses of a labyrinth.

Through all this Shoon conducted his variously startled guests, with a leisure and a complacency from which it might have been guessed that the expedition to the press was but an expedient for displaying these more curious possessions. The visitors showed suitable amusement and curiosity. Miss Cavey, who had been steadily regaining nervous tone, ran hither and thither in a distressing convention of boyish glee. Herbert Chown had the appearance of making careful mental notes of what he evidently regarded as a highly pathological exhibition. Peter Holme, prowling in the rear of the party, was diverting himself by registering extreme terror according to the conventions of the screen. Only Mr Eliot seemed to be unimpressed by the novelty of what he saw about him; he might have been strolling out to keep an unimportant appointment at the end of a familiar street.

The press, when reached, proved deserted; Shoon was proposing to do all the manipulating and explaining himself. There was a great deal of machinery, and a great deal of miscellaneous material evidently laid out for inspection. The visitors, who were cold, hungry, and mindful that their host's expository style was leisured and detailed, looked about them with misgiving; then,

conscious of a slightly dismal pause, they hastened to premature and uncomprehending murmurs of appreciation.

Patricia, glancing round the group of conscientiously intelligent faces, was arrested by something odd in the bearing of Timmy. She edged over to him. 'Whatever is the matter? You look more distraught than Peter Holme, who seems to be having frightful pains inside.'

'Peter?' Timmy started and answered evasively. 'He's just having fun practising for the coast – that's what they call Hollywood. He thinks that he's booked for a new Spider film there in May, which is apparently the last straw.' Timmy hesitated. 'I say, Patricia, I've made an awful fool of myself – childish impulse – rather like the joker really...it was those trifles.'

'Jasper's complimentary verses? You wrote them?'

'Yes – when we came in. Just what was wanted. And then I came down here with an old party who is a sort of compositor and watched him set them up. And then – well – the old party went away and I stopped.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Something very awful. It seemed amusing at the time, but now I'm appalled. I took the things to pieces and set up something else. Rather ribald. I'm afraid Shoon's delighted exclamations won't come off.'

'Timmy – you couldn't!'

'But I did. We have a little press at home and it was technically easy. I have such impulses at times.' Timmy was all dismay – a dismay which Patricia realized in sudden consternation to be

the merest reflection of the art of Peter Holme. And even as she looked Timmy slowly grinned. 'I hope', he said, 'that Shoon's so angry that he bundles us all out, *and* that you and Belinda lose your jobs. I never realized what an awful racket this Abbey is. It should be liquidated. And as for the Collection, poor Gib was quite right. It smells. If you took your nose out of your medieval manuscripts and what-not you would be aware of that at once.'

'You unspeakable—'

'I blame Belinda more than you.' Timmy was speaking, amazingly, with a mild decision oddly reminiscent of his father. 'She's a writer's daughter and ought to know. English Erotic Correspondence...lord, lord, *lord*! It's like a hareem fantasy in a bad case of anaesthesia sexualis. You had both much better snap out of it.'

'It doesn't perhaps occur to you that I have a living to earn?'

'Rubbish.'

They glared at each other wrathfully. 'I suppose', said Patricia, raising her voice recklessly above the hum of some piece of machinery which Shoon had set in motion, 'that this is a proposal of marriage?'

'But yes. Patricia, you *are* a smart girl.'

'Kids, kitchen, and church?'

'Church as you please. Kids yes. And a chap must eat.'

Patricia took one fleeting glance at the setting which Timmy had chosen for this colloquy. Miss Cavey was being shown how to ink a plate; she had messed her fingers and was just opening her

mouth to yelp. Hugo Toplady was looking furtively at his watch. Adrian Kermode was munching a macaroon which he had secreted at tea. At the door by which they had entered something had gone wrong with the Gothic machinery and amid a rattling of chains a skeleton was behaving like a crazy cuckoo-clock. In the middle of the cellar Shoon, with eyes flickering oddly at Rupert Eliot, was suavely expatiating on the ancient craft of printing. And hard by was the elegant power-operated flat-pressure machine designed presently to elicit delighted exclamations. All these, though with the remoteness of a scene viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, sharply etched themselves on Patricia's mind. She managed to nod towards the press. 'Timmy, if what you have set up is *stupid*—'

'My finals' – Timmy had the sudden confidence of a god – 'end on the fifteenth of June. Choose any day in the fortnight following.'

Patricia, seeking words to pierce this bubble, saw Belinda across the cellar. And Belinda was infinitely far away. Between them she saw her own hand floating; it was pointing at the press. 'Your finals', she heard herself saying, 'are *there*. The sixteenth of June if you get past that. John says there's just one rule for a woman: don't marry a fool.'

Timmy sighed luxuriously. 'Brother-fixated,' he said, 'but we'll soon settle that. Dear, dear, *dear* Patricia—'

He stopped. Shoon had contrived to command silence in the cellar and the clanking of the chain outside the party was disposing itself like a grotesque ballet about the printing-press. And silvery and distinguished as his person the voice of their host addressed them.

'And now', Shoon was saying, 'let me imitate a pleasant habit of Horace Walpole's which abundantly deserves to be imitated. Let me invite Miss Eliot' – Shoon paused for a moment as if to hint, with the ghost of an apologetic bow to Miss Cavey, the extreme good-breeding of this choice – 'let me invite' – he turned and bowed to Mr Eliot – 'your daughter to set our press in motion.' Shoon paused again to receive the charmed murmurs of his guest. 'At the moment I will say no more than this. Commonly I myself compose – in Latin. The trifles go out *e typographeo Shooniano*. But on this occasion, and in the presence of Latinists so distinguished' – Shoon's graceful inclination went this time to Bussenschutt and Winter – 'the words of Mercury would indeed be harsh after the songs of Apollo. May I invite Mrs Moule and Miss Cavey to prepare to receive what may come from the machine.'

It was impossible, Patricia unhappily reflected as she looked round the circle of expectant faces, that Timmy's joke could appear other than stupid; it was impossible to conceive any witticism, any savagery which in the circumstances could quite come off. The demonstration would have surprise; it would not have – as Gib Overall's demonstration had had – spontaneity; and ribaldry ought to be spontaneous. If only –

Belinda flicked a lever; there was a little hum of machinery; the visitors fell silent. Mr Eliot had a thoughtful eye on the deranged skeleton; Timmy was peering with cheerful innocence at the ceiling; everyone else attended to the business on hand. Patricia wondered if she ought to intervene by falling down and simulating a fit. Even as the thought occurred to her the machine

gave a final whirr, the platen rose, the carriage slid out, the visitors once more murmured their interest, Shoon lifted off a boldly printed sheet and handed it to the ladies who were to receive it. Only the delighted exclamations were wanting to complete the ceremony.

Mrs Moule, thought Patricia, will blush; the Cavey will give tongue – and after that the deluge. But Mrs Moule was not blushing; she was frowning and laying an unobtrusively restraining hand on Miss Cavey's arm. 'How very nicely printed,' said Mrs Moule briskly; 'how very nicely printed indeed.' And without haste she began to fold up the sheet of paper with the evident intention of stowing it away in her bag.

This masterly stroke of presence of mind almost succeeded as it deserved. The visitors, attuned to embarrassment, realized that something was wrong; Miss Cavey, by mere silence, achieved a superhuman effort of tact; only Shoon was disastrously obtuse. 'Perhaps', he said blandly in the uneasy silence, 'Mrs Moule will favour us by reading the trifle aloud?'

Mrs Moule shot him a significant look which was unfortunately lost in the dim lighting of the cellar. 'Later,' she replied. 'I would rather leave it till later, if you don't mind.'

'Dear lady' – Shoon, perhaps because he was under the impression that only Mrs Moule's modesty was preventing her from reading what was a complimentary effusion, was fatally insistent – 'I must beg you not to keep from us the singularly felicitous composition' – he made a charming gesture at Timmy – 'of our very talented young friend.'

Worse, thought Patricia, and worse. Mrs Moule looked at Timmy first with surprise and then with a severity which long ago must have made innumerable schoolgirls quail. 'Very well,' said Mrs Moule, 'I will read *exactly* what is printed here.' And she unfolded the paper. Its crisp texture made a dry rustle in her hands; the sound was echoed in the rattle of the bones of the skeleton and in the faint clanking of chains down the corridor.

Timmy, Patricia saw, was looking less uncomfortable than obscurely perplexed. But Timmy too now seemed a long way off, and as from a long way off she heard the voice, firm and level, of Mrs Moule.

'Sacred to the memory of Rupert Mervyn Bevis Eliot, of Crossgarth, in the county of Cumberland, Baronet, born at Rust Hall, Hampshire on the third of April, eighteen-hundred and eighty, died' – Mrs Moule paused. 'Isn't *this*', she asked, 'the thirteenth of November?'

There was silence. The chain rattled, the skeleton creaked, far down the corridor yet another of Shoon's devices resumed its activity in a series of ebbing groans.

'Died', read Mrs Moule, *'on the thirteenth of November, nineteen- hundred and thirty-eight, at Shoon Abbey, Sussex.'*

There were cries of indignation, little eddies of excited talk. Under cover of these Patricia seized Timmy's hand. 'Timmy, you couldn't–'

'I didn't.' Timmy was looking utterly blank. 'That's not what I set up at all.' He grinned fleetingly. 'What I did, you'll never know. Lord, lord, *lord* – if it hasn't got Rupert. The bomb and

the middle black were poor things to this. He's cracking.'

Even as Patricia looked Rupert Eliot's voice rose harsh and unsteady – rose not in anger but in urgent question. 'Is that all?' he cried. Everybody turned towards him. Pale as any of Shoon's Gothic exhibits, he was leaning heavily on a table. 'Is that', he cried, '*all?*'

Mrs Moule hesitated. 'There is just one more line – a sort of epitaph.'

'Read it.'

'*He was a nuisance.*'

The little sentence, oddly final, ebbed into the shadows around them. The skeleton had run down and gone limp in its corner, the chain had stopped clanking, the groans – as if their clockwork too was failing – were fainter and more prolonged. And once more everybody was uncomfortably silent.

'I cannot say', said Shoon presently, 'how much I regret–'

He was interrupted by Mr Eliot. Mr Eliot took two paces forward and – as subtly but as definitely as after the theft of the Renoir – held the centre of the stage. 'This', he said in a tone at once of decent gravity and speculative interest, 'was entirely my idea.'

'Of course,' said Mr Eliot, 'there is something not dissimilar in – I think – Poe. The man who found his own name, with the date of his death, mysteriously carved on what ought to have been a blank tombstone in a mason's yard. Sure enough he died – rather heroically – on the very day. But the *printing* of such an intimation I have believed to be entirely my own idea – and one I

have never divulged. It is, of course, a matter of telepathy; I have explained that' – Mr Eliot smiled placidly at Patricia – 'to your brother – who, incidentally, doesn't appear to be here.' He looked round in a leisurely way; Appleby was certainly missing. 'My dear Rupert, you know how much cause I have to sympathize with you. For I am afraid that this is another manifestation. As Pope wrote of another spider – the creature's at his dirty work again.'

'Throned', said a thick voice from a corner, 'in the centre of his thin designs.'

'Exactly, my dear Archie. And proud' – Mr Eliot waved at the paper still held by Mrs Moule – 'of a small extent of flimsy lines.' Mr Eliot, taking time to evince a calm pleasure at this fantastic cross-talk, turned again to Rupert, 'Rupert, I don't want to make any unnerving suggestion – but would it not be wiser, perhaps, if you went away?'

'Away?'

'I mean, had we not better all cut our visit – our very pleasant visit – short? That earlier message which you had about keeping midnight's promise at–'

Mr Eliot was interrupted by renewed and massive activity on the part of Shoon's Gothic contraptions. Somebody was coming rapidly down the passages leading to the cellar in which they stood. It was Appleby. He halted in the doorway. 'I have news', he said, 'which will be generally disagreeable. There has been a very efficient raid upon the garages, with the result that there is not a car – or even a bicycle – in commission at the Abbey. Moreover, the telephone line has been cut. A servant has set out for Pigg, actually the nearest place from

which it is possible to phone. Your secretary' – Appleby turned to Shoon – 'has told him to order cars for those who have to leave the Abbey tonight. But it is now a quarter past seven and it is unlikely that we can be relieved' – he glanced at his watch – 'until some time after nine o'clock.'

'My dear Benton,' said Bussenschutt, 'I am not at all sure that you are not an accessory before the fact.'

Bussenschutt was cheerful – amid the depression which had settled on the Abbey cheerful to an indecent degree. He rubbed his hands and rolled himself gently on his chair.

Benton was not cheerful. His expedition had evidently frayed his nerves and shortened his temper. 'Really, Master,' he said, 'everyone must wish that you spoke in less riddles. The habit is growing on you. Several of our colleagues have remarked on it.'

'The murder,' said Bussenschutt. 'I am speaking of the murder – or rather of the projected murder.'

A nervous spasm gave Benton the momentary appearance of rolling too. 'Murder? I know nothing of a murder. What murder can possibly be in question?'

'*Murder at Midnight,*' said Winter idly. 'Or *A Death in the Desert.*'

A stronger spasm seized Benton. 'Really – '

'Had you not,' said Bussenschutt, 'dismissed your conveyance in parsimonious haste, the Eliots with their murdered man might have driven safely away from the Abbey. When Sir Rupert is eliminated – and everything promises that

deplorable issue – you will in a sense be responsible. I am sure you will dislike the novelty of being mixed up in a murder.'

On Benton's face apprehensiveness and bewilderment grew. 'I thought you said their *murdered* man?'

'A prolepsis, my dear Benton. The man is not murdered but fated to be so. At nine o'clock. It is perhaps an uncomfortable thought. But reflection will suggest that Sir Rupert's situation has great spiritual advantages.'

'*Hrrmph!*'

The interjection came from Mummery. Because Mummery seldom proceeded beyond interjections of this sort he had been little in evidence in the course of this disturbed day at the Abbey. But interjection was eminently called for now; Rupert Eliot himself had appeared on the fringes of the group. Bussenschutt's mysterious high spirits, however, were not to be put down. 'My dear Sir Rupert,' he pursued blandly, 'I have been venturing to remark on certain enviable aspects of your present condition. Like a condemned criminal, you know the precise moment ineluctably appointed for your dissolution. This must be a great spur to meditation and preparedness. Would it be useful to you, I wonder, if I were to mention that Shoon has an oratory? In the west wing and most comfortably appointed.'

Rupert Eliot received these outrageous pleasantries without amusement and without anger. Perhaps, Appleby thought, he scarcely heard them; he was in an incipiently distraught condition which made him oddly like Horace Benton – with whom, indeed, he seemed to be

exchanging alarmed glances. For a man of the world with a long tale of tight places behind him he was putting up an unimpressive show.

'It would be more to the point', Winter broke in, 'if Sir Rupert were found some place of security. I don't believe the thing is serious; it all began in folly and in mere fantasy it is likely to end. But there's no harm in being on the safe side.' Winter looked gloomily from Rupert to Bussenschutt. 'It has been literally a preposterous affair. Endless complications and a promise of murder right at the end.' A change had come over Winter; he was both gloomy and bored. 'High time that the curtain fell on so irregular a comedy.'

'Fell', asked Archie Eliot, 'on what tableau? Shoon's butler entering the library and finding Rupert's corpse?'

'Dear me,' said Mr Eliot, who, with Appleby, had been listening silently to the rather ragged talk. 'Dear me – I once thought of writing a story with just that preposterous twist. The butler was to come in just like that – to behave in the last chapter as he commonly does in the first. I thought it over and turned it down. Rather too rule-of-thumb novelty. But that is by the way. Winter's suggestion that Rupert be found some place of security is excellent. John, do you not agree?'

'I think', said Appleby, 'that such a place can and will be found.'

'The west tower,' suggested Archie. 'It has an inspection ladder right up to the top. If he climbed up there he would be as safe as houses.'

'Houses', said Winter, 'are not particularly safe. The proverb is outmoded and deceptive. It seems

to me that nothing is so safe as a safe. I suggest that Sir Rupert be locked up with Shakespeare in the safe we saw when viewing the Collection.'

Busseschutt nodded. 'An excellent suggestion. It has every advantage. While waiting there Sir Rupert may apply himself to, say, *Measure for Measure*. The play contains reflections upon death and the fear of death which are unrivalled in the language.'

Rupert gave a wriggle which was pure Benton. 'Look here,' he said querulously, 'do you really think I'm going to scramble up Archie's damned tower or –'

'Talking of the tower,' interrupted Winter, 'I may say the inspection business is not yet over. Our host's motto appears to be Business as Usual. In a few minutes we're to be led in to supper, and after that we shall be taken to inspect the tower by moonlight. That will be round about half past eight. But it would be unwise to trust Sir Rupert's executioner keeping to the minute–'

'Even now' – Bussenschutt gave another comfortable roll – 'I am disposed to stare rather uneasily into those shadows.' He waved towards the farther end of the gallery-like apartment in which this conference was taking place.

'At least,' pursued Winter, 'it will be unwise for Sir Rupert to join in moonlight rambles.'

'Most unwise', said Mr Eliot. 'And your suggestions, though I am afraid not entirely seriously intended, have put what may be a good idea in my head. Rupert, I think you and I ought to consult Shoon. He is in the tribune with the rest of the party. Will you come?'

For a moment Rupert looked at his cousin Richard suspiciously; then he transferred the same gaze to his cousin Archie. 'Yes,' he said, 'I'll come.'

'I repeat,' said Winter when he and Appleby were presently alone, 'that it is time for the curtain. And for your own turn. Like the bodies at the end of an Elizabethan tragedy, the fragments of our mystery are strewn about the stage. Nobody seems to have any idea what to do with them until some suitably authoritative person enters and gives brief but sufficient directions for their disposal. Your role is to tidy up. But you seem reluctant to begin. I am coming to harbour a suspicion that you have lost grasp. Your attitude a few minutes ago was entirely passive – an attendant lord who shifts from foot to foot near the backdrop and is only waiting to get off-stage for a spot of beer.'

'We all have our roles,' said Appleby vaguely, 'and even the supers have their uses. Mummery, for instance.'

'Mummery?'

'And you are quite right in supposing that the curtain is about to fall. But I think there will only be one corpse.'

'Rupert's?'

'Dear me, no. You haven't got the hang of the thing at all. It has got beyond you, Winter. And I admit that it is complicated. What a tangled web we weave when first–'

Winter started. 'I remember saying that to Timmy some time ago.'

'No doubt. And it's a pity that you didn't say it to yourself earlier still.'

Winter gave Appleby a long, surprised, calculating stare.

Appleby chuckled. 'You know, I'm not *quite* so dim.'

There was a pause. 'At this point', said Winter slowly, 'I believe I feel for a cigarette and murmur something about not knowing what you mean.'

'Nothing could be more orthodox. And I make the orthodox reply. The game is up.'

There was another pause, during which Winter really felt for a cigarette. 'It is all quite irrelevant', he said, 'to the present situation. The thing has indeed got right beyond *me*. Hamlet at the beginning, I have long since been degraded to the merest attendant lord myself.'

'Gerald Winter, don't be so sure. How *can* you be sure? The thing, as you agree, has got beyond you. And there is to be a corpse on the mat before the evening is out. Not Rupert's. What if it is to be your own?'

Winter shook his head impatiently. 'This is mere obfuscation and darkening counsel. I don't come into the picture at all.'

'But does Shoon know that?'

'Shoon?' Winter stared at Appleby in complete bewilderment. 'What on earth has Shoon--'

Appleby gave an odd pleasurable sigh. 'It is very complicated,' he said; 'very complicated and very closely knit. It is a long time since I enjoyed anything so much. Let me keep quite clear of overstatement. As corpse you are a street ahead

of Rupert Eliot. But I don't say you mayn't be beaten at the post by—'

'By whom, in heaven's name?'

Appleby sighed once more. 'The game – your game – *is* up; isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'And Bussenschutt has got the Codex?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' said Appleby, 'there you are.'

'As I remarked in my earlier confessions', said Winter, 'snooping the Birdwire's archaic marble and locking her up in a cellar was a mistake. I was tolerably safe from her, because she had never learnt my name. But, by the same token, she was tolerably safe from me. On no conceivable occasion could I ever approach her again. And a very little reflection after the excitement of my theft showed me what a pity that was.'

'During our brief acquaintance, as I told you, she contrived to favour me with a good deal of scandal. With scandal and the promise of scandal. I was a generation her junior, she said, and among the pleasures I might look forward to in middle age was that of reading her posthumous memoirs. She showed me two sets of notebooks – red and black. In the black she collected scandalous material which she could fairly safely publish in her current books; in the red she collected material which must wait until the people concerned were dead and unable to sue for libel. I suppose I showed decent aptitude for the subject – I live out my life in an Oxford college, after all – and she let me in on a fragment or two or what was in store. A few

names, even, were mentioned, and among them – would you believe it? that of Horace Benton. She had gathered, I suppose, that I was in the academic way, and thought that I might be intrigued to know she had a line on a respectable classical scholar. Whatever it was, it was something pretty steep; but I didn't succeed in getting any particulars. I suppose now, of course, that what she must have known about friend Horace was his gun-running or whatever it may have been for Shoon.'

'A reasonable hypothesis,' said Appleby.

'A cloistered life makes one deplorably guileless. Serious scandal about Benton intrigued me enormously. Nevertheless it wasn't until I got to Split, and had unpacked my marble in a capital inn called the Grand Hotel of the Universe, that I saw what an opportunity I had missed.

'Mummery, I suppose, has put you on the business of Benton's Codex. It was a terrific find and he behaved over it quite atrociously. He never let the thing out of his hands. There was a whopping great meeting of the learned in Paris and the Codex was duly authenticated by the essential people – Horace brooding over it meanwhile like a child fearing the theft of its favourite toy. The scene has become legendary; the annals of scholarship hold probably nothing quite like it. And hard upon that he locked his find up. He has published fragments from time to time, complete with facsimiles and so on. But he continued to this day – to this evening as ever was, to be exact – to sit on the Codex as a whole. You would have to imagine an attempt to sit on some important contribution to clinical medicine if you were attempting to gauge the indignation roused among the people concerned

with such things – among them myself. And sitting there in Split, staring out at the ruins of Diocletian's palace, I saw what an ass I had been. For the sake of this wretched marble I had missed the chance of my career.'

Appleby nodded. 'And opportunities for really considerable blackmail so seldom occur. One sympathizes with your distress of mind.'

'I brooded on the business off and on for years. Then it happened that I began to read Eliot's books.'

'Oh, dear – this is bad. It is just what Eliot fears. I have been endeavouring to assure him that criminals are not attracted by his sort of stuff. But I hadn't in mind pertinaciously fantastical people like yourself.' Appleby shook his head. 'Didn't I say talk was the key to this mystery? One has only to listen to yours to feel that you are a strong candidate for any really extravagant role. When I listened to you on the art of Labrador I said to myself: "This is my man."'

'But I'm *not* your man. The yarn you are making me spin has nothing to do with the case. If, as you seem to feel, this is a pearl of a mystery I must plead guilty to being the original irritant in the oyster: no more than that. But to resume. I began to read Eliot's books and I liked the Spider. I liked particularly the fact that he *had* been a crook and was *now* a pillar of law and order.'

'Ah,' said Appleby, 'that is very interesting indeed. It makes your conduct rather less wanton and rather more intelligent. I like the idea there.'

Winter looked soberly at his companion. 'Your brain', he said, 'is as good as Bussenschutt's. And

his is one of the better brains in England. Lord help the nasty little burglars among whom you spend your life.'

'Burglars', said Appleby, 'brings us back to the point.'

'Yes. My problem was not simple. The Birdwire had the facts about Benton – some years ago had the facts committed to paper in one of a number of little red notebooks. I had to get the facts. I had to apply them. And here I admit to a tortuous mind. Take the applying of them. You can see what Bussenschutt has done. Having pocketed the facts he has simply marched up to Benton and done a deal. To me that didn't seem possible. I considered that if I simply attempted to blackmail Benton in my own person he would call my bluff. He would challenge me to make my accusations or whatever they were public and in all probability I wouldn't have the guts – or the blackguardism – to do it. I doubt if Bussenschutt would either. But Bussenschutt is the better psychologist. He knew that Benton would crumple at once, and he attempted nothing elaborate. My weakness is no doubt elaboration.'

'Quite so.'

'Go back to the problem of getting the facts. I disliked finding an accomplice to cultivate and wheedle the Birdwire. I couldn't approach her myself. Only burglary was left.

'The burglary – its motive – must be mysterious. If it became known that the woman had simply been robbed of scandalous memoirs my object might be defeated. So I thought of a large-scale burglary which should have the evident character of a broad joke or burlesque. I discovered something of the Birdwire's

circumstances – the legend of a husband in the city, her strained relations with the Eliots. I prospected the ground. I set the key of rather crude jesting by ringing up Eliot and making a coarse joke about the lady and himself. And then I burgled. I thought it likely that I should have to carry off a good deal of material for subsequent search. So I went down in a car, spent a late afternoon drugging a great many dogs, broke in at night, collared a mass of curios and all the papers I could find, painted my rude painting–’

‘You have more than once’, interrupted Appleby, ‘shown a tendency to defend the humour involved, and to assert that the affair hurt nobody.’

‘No more it did. My next business was to emphasize the character of the whole affair as a freakish joke by returning everything I had nobbled. You know how I contrived that. The Spider *qua* crook stole the stuff; the Spider *qua* detective recovered it. Here was the first place in which the double character of Eliot’s creature was to help me.

‘It is a thousand pities that I really have no more to tell. I failed to get what I wanted. When at home, the Birdwire no doubt keeps her more scandalous material at a bank. So I was dished and there an end of it. But you have guessed how I meant to carry on. Armed with the deadly facts, I was going to turn not myself but the Spider loose on Benton. I felt that Benton would be peculiarly vulnerable to a sort of hanky-panky attack – to something, in fact, of the sort that has been attempted at Rust.’

‘Bussenschutt this afternoon said very much the same thing.’

'The Spider's double character might have been brought into play again: the crook who blackmailed; the detective who exposed. I never formulated anything precise, but if I had only got my facts it would all have come, I don't doubt.

'And that is the end of my part of the affair. The rest of the Codex story is Bussenschutt's. I was a bit thrown off my balance – as you can imagine – by Timmy's story and appeal. And that night I rashly pitched the Birdwire at Benton's head in the presence of Bussenschutt. As one might imagine, he was on it like a flash. He simply stormed La Hacienda, put the silly woman in his pocket, got whatever the horrid truth may have been, walked in on Benton and ordered him up to town to fetch and deliver the Codex. Bussenschutt has a grand simplicity and I give him best. But after the Birdwire burglary the Spider business passes out of our hands, and whatever the mystery may be our academic tragi-comedy is irrelevant to it.'

'On the contrary, it may be vital.'

Winter shook his head. 'I don't see it. And, incidentally, I don't at all see how you got on to me.'

'My dear man, crime is not your pigeon. You have been most suspiciously out of place throughout. Why were you at Rust at all? I asked myself that at the beginning. It wasn't a bit your business to come and investigate an embarrassing domestic problem of the sort brought to you by Timmy. Unless you had an interest in it your instinct would have been amiably to refuse. I practically put that to you when you came poking in on me after the theft of the Renoir. And the next minute, when I suggested rather gravely that something really

serious might happen, you started to out with something and thought better of it. Later you analysed the situation confronting us with quite suspicious clarity: a joke by *A*, you suggested, might give the notion of a crime or misdemeanour to *B*. On the other hand there was a suspicious lack of clarity in your first account of the conversation in your common-room when Benton was scared by the mention of the Birdwire. "A manuscript of Benton's which had been found in the Levant." I wasn't clear just how that came in. But – as I said before – your identifying and then dodging the Birdwire was the cardinal point. That helped me to force your first confession. After that a little conversation with Mummery gave me a line on the importance of the Codex. And after *that*' – Appleby chuckled – 'and as one has so often to do in my trade, I guessed.'

'A joke by *A* may give the notion of a crime or misdemeanour to *B*. If that is a clear analysis isn't it as much as to say that my story is irrelevant to what has happened since?'

'It would be nice to be certain of that. It would be nice to think that you and your precious colleagues and your Codex are done with and out of the way. If I could place you well back-stage what you call my role of tidying up would be simpler. Eliminations – the problem more clearly seen; more eliminations – the problem seen more clearly still. The Eliotic manner.' Appleby shook his head. 'But, as I say, things may be more closely knit than that. Your burglary may have got you in more deeply than you think. So take warning once more. When standing there by the back-drop while the tidy up goes forward, just

look out for knives, pistol shots, or heavy weights being dropped on you from above.'

'I can't see why - '

'Bussenschutt, having worked it all nicely out, as good as knows that you were the Birdwire burglar?'

'I suppose so.'

'And he's a gossip?'

'Most certainly. But even so--'

Appleby stood up. 'I do sincerely believe', he said, 'that somebody may attempt to murder you. I admit, though, that it's a longish shot.' He looked at his watch. 'We shall be late for this supper... It has all been rather slow, don't you think? But it's a minute by minute affair now. I hope to get early to bed.'

More than once before in periods of crisis Hugo Toplady had proved his worth. His conversation was sedative; his sense of decorum made him instinctively resist unseemly exhibitions of excitement or agitation. It was perhaps because of this that Belinda contrived to manoeuvre him at supper into a place beside her now frankly alarmed cousin Rupert.

'I cannot say', said Toplady to Belinda and Rupert indifferently, 'how much I regret - and particularly in view of the happy way that this one matter at least seems to be turning out - my grandmother.'

'Your grandmother?' said Belinda blankly.

'The matter of my grandmother. I lent her Timmy's poems. Not, I really must not omit to plead, without reasonable cause, for my

grandmother has always been interested in that sort of thing. Her younger brother had to go into the Home Office, and at that period there was, I believe, a great deal of poetry in the Home Office. It was quite the thing there for a time, and my grandmother became interested in a way. I thought she might find somebody up in it all who could give a considered criticism. But reflection' – Toplady looked very reflective – 'has led me to conclude that it was not critical appraisal that Timmy designed. At one time, you know, he gave the poems to – to a person from Nubia, who could hardly be expected to have any nicety in English versification. I have come to think that Timmy likes to give his verses to people he *likes*: he used to say – I remember now that I have endeavoured to recall the matter – that this black person had some *very* attractive ways indeed. What I mean is that I am sorry that he has not the verses at hand now when it can hardly be indiscreet to suspect that he may be reflecting that if he *did* have them his impulse would be – and we are all happy, I think, to feel that we do reasonably suspect this – to give them to Miss Appleby.'

This was sedative enough, and Toplady followed it up by turning to Rupert, who was staring glumly in front of him. 'Sir Rupert,' he asked with serious courtesy, 'are *you* interested in poetry?'

Rupert started as if from concentrated thought. 'Poetry? Not in my line – man of the world – never cared for anything' – his eye went uneasily round the table and came to rest on Appleby just opposite – 'anything fanciful.'

He relapsed into silence. Toplady appeared to conduct a brief review of other agreeable and

distracting topics. 'Sir Rupert,' he said, 'do you know anything about the anatomy of camels?'

Rupert dropped his knife and fork and looked as alarmed as if suddenly compelled to doubt his neighbour's sanity. 'Belinda,' he said abruptly, 'you know about camels – damn it, I mean cars' – he gave Toplady a sullen glare – 'and must know what has happened. Can't a single one be got going?'

'I asked' – Toplady's tone held a firm protest against this unmannerly changing of the subject – 'merely because the matter seems to interest your cousin. I think it must have to do with *A Death in the Desert*. What writers call, I believe, local colour. Whether the creatures stand up head or tail first – that sort of thing. And I thought that as you knew the Near East–'

'Young man, I don't know the Near East.'

Toplady looked solemnly surprised. 'But my uncle Rudolph,' he said, 'who last had the Legation at Teheran, has mentioned you in *Indiscretions*. I was reading it the other day. He met Sir Rupert Eliot when attached to a military mission to–'

'No doubt. But I can't help Richard with his damned camels all the same. Whom has he been talking to? If he must write these rubbishing fictions for shop-girls and counter-jumpers let him keep off the subject in decent society. That's what I say.' Rupert glared interrogatively at Toplady.

'Really, Sir Rupert, I can conceive more impropriety in certain ways of *talking* about Mr Eliot's books than anything that can be imagined of the *writing* of them.'

Hugo, Belinda thought, could occasionally summon all the crushing power of a devastatingly right-thinking character in Jane Austen. 'Daddy', she said, 'seems particularly keen on *A Death in the Desert*. I don't think he'd ever have scrapped it as he scrapped *Murder at Midnight*. Not for anything. He very seldom talks about the stories, but he has said the basic idea is just the sort that such books should have – something imaginatively convincing but not actually possible.'

'It must have been Archie', said Rupert to Toplady, 'whom your uncle met. Archie's been in the East often enough. It was where he first met Shoon. And I have reason to believe that in disreputable scrapes he has sometimes taken my name. Just his sense of humour.'

'My uncle, Sir Rupert, is most unlikely to have been associated with Sir Archie in *disreputable scrapes*.'

This was almost a quarrel. 'Something basically fantastic,' continued Belinda by way of diversion. 'Like *The Trapdoor*. A criminal could be imagined as scoring in that way, but no real criminal is ever likely to be in a position to do so.'

'I think', said Rupert hotly – and Belinda had the satisfaction of feeling that she had successfully drawn his fire – 'that we have quite enough confounded fantasy round us at the moment without yattering about it. I'm an unimaginative man of affairs myself and I don't care for it.'

'But, Rupert – we're all fantastic. I mean all the Eliots. Think of great-aunt Rachael.'

'Great-aunt Rachael?' asked Toplady courteously.

'You haven't met her, but she lives with us. Rupert is her favourite nephew.' Belinda paused maliciously – as if this were evidence enough of the fantastic nature of the late Timothy Eliot's widow. 'She's ninety-something and ready for any trick one can put her up to. And daddy, even if he stops writing, will certainly grow more fantastic with the years. And Timmy wants to be an ambassador. We really are quite odd.'

Toplady considered the right reply to this. 'In my mother's family', he confessed, 'a marked vein of eccentricity has made itself evident from time to time.'

'The Shaping Spirit,' said Miss Cavey tensely; 'the Creative Imagination!' She fixed on Shoon an eye which seemed to calculate whether he were within reach of a clammy paw. 'I sometimes feel' – her voice became very solemn – 'that the Creative Imagination is All!'

Shoon, who was looking thoughtfully down the table, murmured a polite response.

'But Mr Winter', Miss Cavey pursued, 'points out that there is also the Deep Well.'

'The Deep Well?'

'I call it that. Mr Winter calls it the memory. He points out' – Miss Cavey looked momentarily dubious – 'how important somebody – I think it was Proust – thought the memory was.'

'I agree', said Shoon, ' – and Benton here will agree – that memory is very important indeed. I look round my table now; there are familiar and unfamiliar faces; there are, perhaps, faces which one can call neither one nor the other. Benton, do you agree with me?'

From the other side of Miss Cavey Benton glanced nervously at his host. 'Really,' he said, 'I have hardly thought.'

'Faces', continued Shoon with a flight into elegance, 'over which there flickers some half-light from the torch of Mnemosyne. Benton's colleagues, Miss Cavey, are most interesting men. You mention Winter. He is, it seems, a most enterprising fellow. Bussenschutt has given me some curious particulars of his habits – of his technique. I ask myself: is his one of the faces over which that half-light of memory passes? And at the moment I have to answer that it is not.'

Miss Cavey, because the tenor of these remarks was mysterious to her, looked particularly intelligent and understanding. Benton looked increasingly uneasy.

'Have you', Shoon continued, 'met Mrs Birdwire, my dear Miss Cavey? I am sorry she cannot come across tonight; she would enjoy meeting a fellow writer. We are not on confidential terms, but I know her to be discreet. Which is just right for neighbourliness. Benton, you agree that she is an excellent creature?'

'Really, Shoon, it is so many years—'

'Ah, Memory, the fickle jade, once more! There are things, are there not, that we are particularly willing to forget: old humiliations, false starts, risks we were content to run when we were in a small way? Yes, indeed.'

Benton, who appeared to be masticating desperately without the aid of salivation, looked anxiously from Shoon to a stolidly perplexed Miss Cavey. 'I wish', he said, 'that the moon may come out for this interesting inspection of the tower.'

'For Discretion, too,' continued Shoon, ignoring this, 'is a goddess. You will agree, Benton, that there is much in the lives even of the most blameless which they would not care to have pass from the keeping of the discreet to that of the indiscreet among their acquaintance.' He looked thoughtfully down the table once more. 'I am almost surprised that Winter's face is not at least faintly familiar to me. Benton, you are acquainted with his career?'

'I wish I could help your curiosity, Shoon. But really, I have never much enquired.'

'He has never, by any chance, been in – ah – a branch of the government service? Dons sometimes drift that way for a time. I had a dear friend – a scholar of great distinction – who was for a time in the Military Intelligence. A most interesting calling, do you not think, Miss Cavey?'

'Really' – Benton abandoned the attempt to eat – 'you take me into very unfamiliar territory. I think it hardly possible.'

'There are matters', said Shoon, 'about which it is satisfactory to make sure.' He picked up and idly toyed with a carving knife before him. 'Yes, indeed.' Once more he looked reflectively down the table. 'What an interesting family the Eliots are.'

'It has occurred to me–' began Miss Cavey. It had occurred to Miss Cavey that her present hosts at Rust would capitally fill a niche in her projected *Season of Mists*. But she was not given the opportunity to enlarge on this topic now.

'Look at them, Benton,' Shoon continued. 'Regard each in turn. Does nothing come back to you? Scrutinize them, I beg.'

Benton scrutinized – evidently keenly conscious that meantime he was being scrutinized himself. 'I wish', he said, 'that my memory was not so indifferent. But I am really almost certain that – apart from my pupil – I never saw any of them before they came across today. Except – again – Mr Eliot himself. He did once call on me at college.'

Shoon shook his head musingly. 'It is curious,' he murmured. 'Like so much that has been happening – and that promises to happen – around us, it is curious. My mind is on Muscat – or was it Dunkot? Benton, does that bring nothing to your recollection? Look again, my dear man.'

Benton looked again – fixedly at Belinda. 'No,' he declared with an attempt at finality, 'I can discover no link of association at all.'

Shoon shook his head in perplexity. 'Miss Cavey,' he said as if politely abandoning a barren subject, 'I am very interested in plots. Let us talk about that.'

The little man André raised a hand and pointed the index finger into space. He paused dramatically; the hand moved slowly on a horizontal line above his head; the index finger, working from the first joint, made arabesques in air the while.

‘This’, said André, ‘is Folly Hall.’

The moving finger ceased to write; the hand made a showman’s flourish. André in disfavour with his own party from Rust, was beguiling himself by recounting the tale of its embarrassments to the Friends of the Venerable Bede.

‘And this’ – Timmy heard Patricia’s voice in his ear – ‘is Nightmare Abbey: come and explore it.’ She spoke urgently, as if André’s description of the affair of the architrave had brought something suddenly to her mind. ‘And don’t worry. I’ll see you don’t miss the west tower.’

They slipped from the room and rambled hand in hand through the great shadowy house. They passed through raftered galleries, panelled halls, armouries where the moonlight streaming through stained glass threw irregular splashes of colour on Patricia’s frock. They went up great carven staircases past bedroom floors where servants were scuttling about with manchets and chet-loaves and hot water bottles; up an uncarpeted staircase to a deserted floor; and from there up a winding staircase to a little round

empty room. They were both panting slightly by the time they had got so far, but above this Timmy presently heard a curious sighing sound.

'The wind is rising,' said Patricia in an absent, conversational voice. She was climbing a loft-ladder in the centre of the room. 'Help, Timmy.'

Timmy held her ankles to steady her, watching with a dubious interest as she strained her slim figure backwards and pushed up the trapdoor above her head. The sighing of the wind became a loud alarming moan. They were on the roof.

Great expanses of lead swam in the full winter moonlight like a calm sea – with here and there the incongruous swell of a frozen and suspended wave where the roof rose in a ridge. In front were battlements, waist-high. Timmy stepped forward, put his hands on the clammy stone to steady himself, and looked down. Far below was something slightly swaying in the wind: it was the topmost bough of a tremendous oak. And then Timmy saw that they were very high, that they were on the highest turret of the main building. There was only one higher point at the Abbey – the great west tower which dominated the ruins.

He turned round. Patricia was leaning on her back against the final pitch of the turret, her feet braced in the leaden gutter. Her body was like a recumbent shadow, her face was pale to the moon, her eyes were following some star through a racing labyrinth of little clouds. 'I suppose,' she said raising her voice against the wind, 'you've got a fair head?'

'Of course I've got a fair head. I've–' He paused in quick suspicion. 'But what about you? I've a notion Belinda said–'

'Come round this side.' Patricia vanished as she spoke; Timmy scrambled after her to the other side of the turret. She took his hand. 'I promised you fun... You see?'

Timmy saw. This was the point at which the house and ruins touched. From the point at which they stood a great bogus-broken wall swept down and away into the darkness. It was without rail or parapet; it was, however, broad and well cemented, though with an irregular surface. Up and down, but always gradually sinking like a giant dipper, it swooped away into the night. There was nothing suicidal about what could be seen of it: granted nerve, that was to say, it would require some element of ill-luck to bring disaster.

Patricia went first. It took them ten minutes to reach solid earth in the large ruined cloister. 'Now,' she said.

Now was the real thing. The great west tower had an inspection ladder – iron rung upon iron rung running to an altitude from which one could survey five counties. 'About Jasper,' said Patricia, clasping the ladder, 'I've come rather to think that you're right. It is all most disturbingly spurious.' She waved her hand at the monstrous pseudo-ruin that stretched for acres around them. 'Even the Collection, I don't doubt.' She began to climb. 'So it's something to get something real out of him.' She was gone.

'I say,' said Timmy, 'I don't think you ought–' But he was speaking to air. And so from Shoon's eccentricity they proceeded to wring the experience of danger. The ladder ran up behind the shelter of a long buttress and Patricia's body was lost in the shadow; only her legs, gleaming palely in their light-toned stockings, worked

steadily just above Timmy's head. And, certainly, Belinda had said something about Patricia having no taste for heights. Timmy noted that beautiful things are not less beautiful, not less desirable, when they dance wantonly within the shadow of danger.

They reached the top quite safely. There was a small platform, comfortably sheltered and walled in. They sat down. 'Patricia,' asked Timmy sharply, 'is that the only route back?'

'Oh, no. There's a tiny spiral staircase down the middle. The ladder is only for keeping an eye on the external fabric.'

Timmy shivered in a sudden spasm of nervous relaxation. 'Curious,' he said, 'that you will never be let do quite that sort of thing again.'

Patricia made no reply. The wind had blown nearly all the clouds away and the stars were as bright as in a frost. These were moments of extraordinary happiness and peace. Timmy, leaning back on the chill stone beside Patricia, looked in imagination down from his tower and massively felt the absolute absurdity and incomprehensibility of Shoon Abbey and all else that lay below. He looked down from his tower and below was one great antic jig, one *danse macabre*. It was a vision, an intellectual clarification of exceptional exactness. It was an intimation of unknown and pleasing powers within himself. He lay still and chanted rhymes.

*'...up unto the watch-towre get,
And see all things despoyl'd of fallacies:
Thou shalt not peepe through lattices of
eyes,*

*Nor heare through Labyrinths of eares,
nor learne*

By circuit–'

Abruptly Timmy stopped, exclaimed, clutched at air. The west tower had given an ugly lurch.

He heard Patricia's laugh. 'Only the wind,' she said; '-the wind and your cousin Archie's ingenuity. The stonework below is all a fake. We're slung up here on great steel girders. It's just as if you had a golf-club standing on its steel shaft, and you vibrated it and we were inside the head. An amusing motion...'

Gently the top-heavy crown of the tower swung to the wind. It was cold. They drew closer together. 'I'm glad we did that scramble,' said Patricia. 'It clears the head. And no more damage' – she looked at her stocking – 'than one big ladder.'

Timmy looked at the ladder. 'Did you ever,' he asked, 'play Snakes and Ladders? Belinda and I once had a set with little moral lessons thrown in.'

'I hope you profited.'

'Moral lessons in pictures. At the head of the biggest snake was Laziness: chaps lounging in a pub.' Timmy tapped Patricia on the head. 'You went right down that snake to Failure.' He tapped her on the toes. 'Failure was a sort of workhouse ward.'

'And the ladders?'

'The biggest stood for Industry.' And Timmy placed two fingers at the bottom of the ladder on

Patricia's stocking. 'From there you climbed straight—'

'I think', said a practical voice behind them, 'they're just going to begin.'

'Just beginning to come out for the inspection,' explained John Appleby. 'No, I believe I'm wrong. But we shan't have long to wait. And with the bright moonlight this is a capital place for a bird's-eye view. Don't, by the way, let me interrupt in the matter of the Snakes and Ladders.'

They stared at him stupidly. 'John,' Patricia demanded, 'why ever—'

'Our friends will come out of the house and make their way here through the broken shadows of the ruins. Once arrived beneath the tower, they are likely to come to a halt in full moonlight. That will be the moment,' Appleby paused, and from the shadow in which he stood there came the click of metal. 'Patricia, do you know that the cellarium which is so carefully guarded by that hermit is nothing less than a little arsenal? Or something between that and a wholesale warehouse? Every type of lethal engine neatly laid out on display. I rather wished I could have nobbled a rifle.'

'A rifle!' said Timmy, startled.

Again there came the click of metal. 'A revolver', said Appleby placidly, 'is a tricky thing. Even with a good long barrel like this' – and now there was the ring of steel tapped on stone – 'and any amount of practice one can't do a great deal.'

'John,' interrupted Patricia, 'just what is this about? Who is going to attack whom?'

'Have you ever practised with one?' Appleby took a brother's licence to go his own conversational way. 'The principle is that you don't aim but point. You hold it head-high, bring it down as if it were a pointing forefinger, and fire at the moment your instinct dictates. If you're lucky you really hit the haystack. But of course my business will be to miss.'

Timmy peered at the ground, immensely remote below. 'It doesn't just sound as if in the coming fracas you are going to bear an immensely effective role. I should rather expect you to be shadowing poor old Rupert round.'

'Rupert? Oh, I don't think that anybody except Rupert thinks that Rupert is in any deadly danger.' There was a spurt of a match as Appleby lit a cigarette. 'Not that he *mayn't* be in deadly danger – but that will be his own fault.' There was a chuckle from the shadows. 'You don't mind my beguiling this wait by murmuring enigmas? Patricia knows I don't make a vice of it.'

'Not at all,' said Timmy gloomily; 'not at all.'

'Rupert, by the way, has been securely locked up. A kindly ministering to his nerves on a plan suggested by your father. As nine o'clock approaches he has been put quietly to browse in the Collection. Even if somebody were out for his blood they wouldn't get at him there.'

'They might from the roof,' said Patricia sharply. 'There's a trapdoor—'

Her brother shook his head. 'Well and truly bolted from within.' He stiffened, peered towards the house. 'Another false alarm. I rather wish they'd hurry up.' He paced the little platform. 'I confess to some mild anxiety on behalf of Winter.'

'Winter!' Timmy and Patricia simultaneously exclaimed.

'Something *might* happen to Winter almost at any time. But the risk is small and he must run it. Of course I may be wrong, but what I'm expecting in the next few minutes is something else.'

'You don't think', said Timmy quickly, 'that daddy—'

'Your father has never been in danger of attack. And he isn't now.'

Patricia stood up. 'John,' she said curiously, 'you really think there is to be attempted murder down there?'

'Yes.'

'And that coming up here gives you your best chance of stopping it?

'Yes.'

'There isn't a more certain way? Warning somebody? Arresting somebody?'

'My dear child, the whole affair is utterly shadowy. I've climbed up here on a scaffolding of hair-raising hypotheses which at the moment simply wouldn't face the light of day. The metaphor is old, but you may see what I mean.'

'And if you can't stop this – this murder?'

'Then', said Appleby very placidly, 'it can't be helped.'

'See', said Timmy – and the histrionic trick was used perhaps to conceal a slightly unsteady voice – 'where they come!'

From the direction of the house rose a fitful murmur of voices; a few seconds later a little

group of figures appeared far away among the ruins.

'Winter,' said Appleby softly, 'burgled the Birdwire.'

The figures disappeared; the wind caught their voices and there was silence. Timmy and Patricia peered curiously at the still figure beside them. 'The Collection,' said Appleby – again softly, as if he were feeling his way. 'Your father's reactions; Rupert's talk; the *curiosa*.'

The figures reappeared – a good way nearer – from the straggling shadow of a mouldering wall. Sharply foreshortened and threading their way through crumbled masonry and beneath broken arches, they were like a reconnaissance party disastrously clumped together in some near-obliterated town. The murmur of their voices rose and eddied about the tower; the voice of Miss Cavey, the first to disengage itself, chattered meaninglessly of the moon and the night.

'New Zealand,' said Appleby; 'what happened in *Grand Tarantula*; the career and conversation of Adrian Kermode.'

The party below, advancing between narrowing walls, was only fitfully touched by moonlight. Faintly there came up the sound of somebody stumbling; a little fuss of concern, sympathy, assistance.

Appleby planted himself carefully against the parapet. 'The husband,' he said with sudden confidence, 'of our dear queen.'

They were almost directly below; motionless; caught and held in an arena of coldly pricking light. Shoon's voice, bland and explanatory, floated up; was sharply cut by Appleby's.

'Proust,' said Appleby – and it was as if the light had flooded full on him too – 'and perhaps the anatomy of the camel.'

He was staring fixedly down; suddenly he braced himself as with the consciousness of unexpected emergency; his tongue clicked; Timmy and Patricia, following his gaze, saw the party below divided in two unequal groups. The majority were huddled together staring dutifully up at the tower. At about five yards distance, as if standing apart for the purpose of declamation, was Shoon. Close by Shoon was Winter.

Appleby swung half round. Shoon and Winter were seen to spring apart, and in the same second a report, instantly followed by another, shattered the silence. Shoon disappeared like a flash behind the shelter of a wall; Winter with the barest pause followed his example; the party scattered in panic. Timmy heard a rustle beside him; it was the arm of Appleby dropping; there was a crashing detonation by his ear; the arm swiftly rose and fell; crash after crash tore the night.

Silence, more bewildering than the uproar it succeeded, abruptly fell. Below, everyone had disappeared, making for the house under what cover they could secure. Appleby was looking at his watch. 'Ten to nine,' he said – and his voice came thin and flat to their numbed ears.

Patricia scarcely heard. She was staring in perplexity at that long wall, rising and falling like a switchback in some ghostly Luna Park, on which she and Timmy had crazily scrambled half an hour before...

'Five to nine,' said Appleby. He seemed to be methodically cleaning his revolver; with a sense

of being under orders Timmy and Patricia sat quite still.

‘Almost on nine.’

Timmy stirred uneasily. ‘Had we better be getting down? It seems all quiet.’

As he spoke the tower beneath them lurched like a live thing at the cut of a whip. For a split second they were caught and shaken as by a mountainous surf. The concussion became shattering sound. It rose, unbearably flooded their senses, ebbed away. There succeeded – faint-seeming as a handful of pebbles scattered by a child – the rattle of falling masonry, the tinkle of thousands of fragments of shattered glass.

Appleby took Timmy and Patricia by the arm. Through a pall of smoke they stared at a chaos where, seconds before, the roof of Shoon Abbey had shone tranquilly in the moon.

‘Clearly’, said Appleby, ‘the moment for a tidy-up.’

'Look here,' said Winter, appearing in Shoon's hall, 'I really do object.'

'Object?' Appleby, as if the tidy-up before him could very well bide its time, sat down on a bench.

'I object to being mysteriously singled out as Hamlet after all.'

'Hamlet?' An absent tone in Appleby's voice suggested that his air of leisure cloaked concentrated thinking.

'You told us that a murder had been arranged and dropped a genial hint or two that it might be Shoon who was after me. But you quite failed to mention that he employed gunmen. I reckoned that if I fairly hugged him and kept my eyes open I should be all right. And then he just gets somebody to loose off at me from a convenient eminence in the ruins. I heard that bullet whiz by. My nerve's gone. I'm all bewildered.' Winter, who was obviously wholly undisturbed, shook an indignant head.

'You see *why* you're Hamlet after all?'

'In a dim way, yes – though I must say our amiable host's precautions seem overdone. And in the lord's name what was that appalling explosion? Has he been eliminating someone else? And where is he now? The man's a menace and ought to be nobbled.'

Appleby got briskly to his feet. 'It will do. If the tempo goes right it will do... All questions will be fully and systematically answered in about fifteen minutes. Or *nearly* all.' He grinned at Winter's bewilderment. 'I'm going to find Shoon. Go into the tribune – Patricia, Timmy, go with him too – and keep everyone together. There may be some danger of fire after such a big bang, but no doubt Shoon's staff will control it. Yes, we'll have it all out now. But wait a minute. Yes – I'll come with you.'

'You seem', said Winter resentfully, 'extraordinarily cheerful.'

'My dear man, cheerfulness is most important in an affair like this.'

In the tribune cheerfulness was conspicuously lacking. The party was suffering – not unnaturally – from shock. Miss Cavey was lying on a sofa moaning. Mr Eliot, very pale and very still, was standing beside Belinda. The air was heavy with helpless bewilderment. The only person usefully employed was Chown. He was applying improvised bandages to Rupert Eliot – a Rupert Eliot who was singed, bloody and terrified. Of Shoon there was no sign.

Appleby, reaching the doorway and taking one glance round all this, called out: 'Mr Eliot, are you all right?' Winter noted that anxiety had come into his voice; the whole room turned round at the ring of it.

'Thank you, John,' – Mr Eliot's reply was faint but calm – 'I am quite all right.'

'Good. Nobody need worry.' Appleby was suddenly confident. 'All stop here. I'm going to find Mr Shoon.' Unemotionally, and with the eyes of the whole party upon him, he took his revolver

from his pocket. There was a little gasp of surprise. He poised the weapon in his hand. 'We are all going to have a little talk with our host.'

Brisk and assured, Appleby nodded at the company and was gone.

Minutes dragged by. There had been attempted murder by the west tower. The wind blew coldly through windows which had been shattered by a terrific and unaccountable explosion. Somewhere about the Abbey a detective from Scotland Yard was hunting the Abbey's owner with a revolver. Against all this the party, worn down by days of discomforts great and small, made no attempt to stand up. Numb and dumb, they waited for what would happen next. Miss Cavey continued to moan. Chown, with a grunt of satisfaction, heaved Rupert into an enveloping easy chair. Once Mr Eliot made to speak, checked himself, put his head between his hands and sighed. Of the whole gathering only Adrian Kermode preserved an appearance of active – and puzzled – intelligence.

Minutes dragged by. A clock struck the quarter after nine. The chimes died away and above them rose the sound of footsteps – one man's footsteps – in the corridor outside.

The door opened and Appleby came in.

Patricia almost cried out. Her brother was pale – very pale, very controlled. He looked about him without speaking, closed the door, moved rather slowly to the centre of the room.

'There has been' – he hesitated – 'considerable material damage.'

The opening was obscurely ominous; the party stirred uneasily and once more Mr Eliot seemed

to make a vain attempt to speak.

'As you will have gathered from the fact of Sir Rupert's being wounded, the explosion took place in the Collection. Among the letters. I should imagine that most of them are destroyed.' Appleby braced himself. 'Ladies and gentlemen' – and his voice was at once formal and oddly abrupt – 'Mr Shoon is dead.'

Upon the instant's silence – sharply, briefly – Mr Eliot cried out; the sound released a murmur of horror, of bewilderment... Appleby raised his hand.

'Mr Shoon has been accidentally killed. And yet – not wholly accidentally. He has perished in an attempt to murder Mr Eliot.'

'But, John–' Mr Eliot had stood up, desperate and incredulous.

'Let me speak.' Appleby, securing silence, was evidently casting round in his mind how best to proceed. 'You must understand that our host was a very desperate and determined man. Mr Winter here can witness to that. For an attempt – as some of you have realized – was made to murder him too: the shot in the darkness while you were inspecting the tower. Today' – Appleby's eye went to Bussenschutt – 'Shoon was given reason to believe that Winter might have obtained certain information about questionable early activities of his own. I need not specify how. It is enough to say that the information was in the possession of a lady whom Shoon believed to be discreet, and that when he had reason to think that it had passed to Winter – he acted. That gives you the measure of the man... And Mr Eliot had information about Shoon more dangerous still,'

'But, John, it isn't so.' Mr Eliot's voice came dully from across the room.

'Mr Eliot had this information – *but without knowing it.*'

There was baffled silence.

'But he might be on the verge of knowing it *every moment that he was working on his new book.* That is the secret of the whole mysterious – now of the whole tragic – affair. Shoon could not afford to let *A Death in the Desert* go on,'

Kermode shifted sharply in his seat. 'But the clairvoyance – the knowledge of things Eliot had thought of for–'

'Stop.' Once more Appleby raised his hand. 'Let me get right through. It is complicated; it had better be got clear once and for all. Part of it can only be conjecture. And for that reason the affair had best be – to put it bluntly – hushed up. I am not here as a policeman. There is no case against anybody except a dead man. That Shoon died a violent death at the hands of one of his own detestable inventions is all that the world need know.'

Rupert Eliot, who had been shivering slightly in his chair, looked up sharply. 'Quite right,' he said. 'No need for a washing of this god-awful dirty linen.'

'Sir Rupert, I think, takes the right line. And you must remember that he has been harried today by Shoon too. But that was a blind... Now let me go on.' Appleby's eye went round the room; his voice drove forward; he had achieved an almost hypnotic control of the company. 'Part of the story, I say, can be only conjecture unless

Mr Eliot should come to remember. For the odd point is there: he is powerless to assist us.

'Here then is a conjectural reconstruction. I learnt from Miss Eliot that her father spent the latter part of his army career in the Military Intelligence in the Near East... Mr Eliot, that is correct?'

Mr Eliot nodded a bewildered and anxious head. 'That is certainly so.'

'There – in the East – Mr Eliot came upon one doesn't know what villainy of Shoon's. One can only guess that a murder in the desert was involved. No sooner had he done that than he fell ill. I think – for reasons to which I am just coming – that he must have fallen ill actually on Shoon's hands. When he recovered it was – to Shoon's immense relief – with a memory entirely blank as to the whole affair. Again, Mr Eliot, you agree?'

'I certainly fell ill. And my memory was affected. I remember nothing of Shoon. But –'

'Exactly! Shoon was tolerably safe. Judge then of his consternation when – years later – he learns from Belinda that her father is engaged in writing a novel called *A Death in the Desert*. Why has he chosen such a theme? Must it not be because buried memories of that real affair of violence are rising up in his mind? Or, if the thing be fortuitous, what buried memories may the mere working on such a theme not revive?'

A spell might have been over the tribunal. Peter Holme, leaning forward on a stool by the fire, was staring at Appleby in mere fascination; Miss Cavey's moans had become intermittent gulps; Rupert Eliot was trembling again in his chair; Archie was staring before him just as he had

stared at the inscription on the architrave at Rust two nights before.

'And so Shoon set about driving Eliot from his book – from all his books. As Winter discovered, everything at Rust could be done from the outside. And the clairvoyance – that was the simplest thing of all. We thought of a number of explanations: hypnotism, for example. But we didn't think of another abnormal state of mind which might account for the facts: delirium. And it is because of this that we must suppose Shoon to have had access to Mr Eliot during the illness which resulted in his loss of memory. Mr Eliot had not begun to write the Spider stories then – but fragments of the fantasies were already in his mind. And to score the effects that were scored at Rust fragments were all that Shoon required. He got them from the lips of a delirious man.'

Appleby paused to take breath, and as he paused Bussenschutt intervened. 'I must really–'

'But' – Appleby was off again – 'the attempt to end the Spider stories was a failure. And so Shoon proceeded to more desperate measures. He got us here. He harried Sir Rupert in order – one supposes – to diffuse our anxieties. And then–'

Appleby stopped as if with a full sense of drama. 'And then the plot miscarried. Sir Rupert – threatened by the various messages about what might happen at nine – had taken refuge in the Collection. Shoon set up one of the infernal machines in which he trades. It was to explode on Mr Eliot *when Mr Eliot went to bring Sir Rupert down again*. Probably we should have imagined that the wrong man had been killed, and the motive of the whole affair would have been successfully obscured. Or that was the idea.

Shoon, you may remember, was a great reader' – Appleby swung round on Mr Eliot, and Winter had a momentary impression of him as playing some elaborate instrument – 'of ingenious romances of crime.'

Mr Eliot was again on his feet. 'John...stop. I–'

'But Shoon' – Appleby went grimly on – 'was hoist with his own petard – literally that. There is a poetic justice in his end which might come straight from fiction.' Appleby's eye darted to Kermode, to Bussenschutt. 'Jasper Shoon will never plot again.'

'Never again!'

The party jumped. Appleby, if dramatic, had been quiet; now Mr Eliot's voice rang through the room.

'Never again will I put pen to paper as a writer! This is the end.'

'You fool' – it was Rupert Eliot who had turned on his cousin – 'you soft fool' – Rupert's voice rose in a snarl – 'will you give over thousands of pounds a year just because–'

Like another explosion Appleby's hand rang on a table beside him. 'Sir Rupert, have you not again and again wished the stories at an end? Have you not? And *now* you would have them go on – and get your money from them? *Why?*'

The figures in the tribune might have been turned to stone. Only Rupert moved – lurched back into his chair.

'Why, Sir Rupert – except that Shoon is dead? *But Shoon is not dead.*'

Rupert's head jerked back; his jaw fell oddly open.

'You were given a hint to take the *Begonia* to New Zealand on the ninth of next month. I advise an earlier boat. Shoon is alive. I have locked him in a cupboard.' Appleby suddenly chuckled. 'Alas, it's the only lock I shall ever turn on him.'

'You can get him' – Winter's voice cut quickly in on the bewilderment – 'for inciting somebody to shoot at me out there by the tower.'

'My dear man, that was Sir Rupert shooting at Shoon. And doesn't Shoon know it!' He turned back to Rupert. 'On every account', he said dryly, 'an earlier boat seems best.'

Epilogue

Dr Bussenchutt set down his glass. 'The Smith Woodhouse late-bottled,' he said. 'A wine invariably brilliant on the table.'

'I deprecate', said Mummery, 'aroma in ports.'

'We are to have the Fonseca', said Winter, 'on Founder's Day. Nearly six months to wait.'

The murmur of talk filled the common-room. Appleby's eye, wandering from his companions at the supernumerary table, communed with the critical gaze of Dr Groper over the fireplace, passed on to distinguish in the shadows variously apocryphal portraits of William of Chalfont, Richard à Lys, Sir Humphrey Bohun. On a lectern at the far end of the room, set out for the inspection and comment of the learned, were the first proofs of Dr Bussenschutt's critical edition of the Codex. From outside floated in the chatter of undergraduates arguing a choice of cinemas. Beyond them Oxford, river-rounded, branchy between towers, circled beneath the soft summer night, its progress marked by the chime of discreetly emotive bells.

'Young Eliot', pronounced Bussenschutt, 'is said to be doing well. In general I do not approve of undergraduates entertaining thoughts of matrimony while their Schools are immediately before them. But in this instance there would appear to be no deleterious result. I hope that he will go to the Treasury.' Bussenschutt looked speculatively at Appleby, cautiously across to Benton who was sitting, gloomy and wishful, at the solitude of the little table. 'That was a curious

affair. And the most curious part of it, Mr Appleby, was undoubtedly your own performance at the end.'

Mummery made a short gurgling noise. 'It was a rigmarole of nonsense.'

'Ah, yes, my dear Mummery. But Appleby got the pace just right. It would not have withstood inspection for ten minutes; he drove through with it in just over five.'

'It was nicely done,' murmured Winter. 'Even to your looking deadly pale over the supposed death of poor Shoon. However did you manage that?'

'One nips into a privy', said Appleby placidly, 'and tickles the back of one's throat till one's horridly sick.'

'My dear Master' – Mummery rumbled mysteriously – 'here is a lesson in laborious thoroughness even for you... But was it not all rather unnecessary?'

Appleby nodded. 'Perhaps so. But I was on holiday, after all. And I rather wanted to see Rupert Eliot actually crack. Then there was Mr Eliot. One ought not, I suppose, to teach one's future brother-in-law's father little lessons. Still, I thought that a few minutes' believing that he had inadvertently slaughtered Shoon might do him good. To loose off a couple of bombs while visiting a neighbour' – Appleby shook his head solemnly – 'is really a shockingly irresponsible thing to do. As I once said, he *is* younger than Timmy. When you come to think of it, the heart of the mystery lay in that evident fact.'

'Ah,' said Bussenschutt.

'But the real point of my performance was this. Eliot had come to know that it was Rupert who

was persecuting him. And he knew *how* Rupert was managing it. But he had no notion *why* Rupert was behaving in such a deplorable way. I thought it would be useful to get that out quite clearly – the anatomy of the camel, you know.'

Bussenschutt passed the decanter. 'The anatomy', he said with a great appearance of comprehension, 'of the camel.'

'I felt that if I could only suggest to Rupert that the thing was being huddled up in a foggy way without his being suspected he might be tricked into betraying himself. The great difficulty was glossing over the real crime Rupert had attempted to commit: I mean his nipping out of the Collection to the roof, down the bogus-broken wall, and taking a shot at Shoon. The fact that the shot whizzed past Winter, and the further fact that Shoon really had some faint motive for setting a confederate to eliminate Winter, made it just possible to give the thing the necessary twist. My story was, of course, a rigmarole. Eliot did serve in the Near East, and was invalided home after an illness which slightly impaired his memory. But he and Shoon certainly never had the sort of encounter I suggested. Shoon would clearly not have taken Belinda Eliot into the Abbey if there had been anything. of the sort.'

'You know' – Bussenschutt was almost bashful – 'I thought of that at the time.'

Appleby smiled. 'I was afraid somebody would chip in and explode the whole thing – on any one of a score of counts. I was particularly afraid of Kermode. For of course Kermode *knew*. About the clairvoyance, I mean. He as good as explained it to me quite early on. He had a start, I suppose; he understands the writing of that sort of stuff. And – in a way – he motivated the whole plot'

There was a meditative pause. 'Quite so,' said Bussenschutt. 'Um, most clearly so.' An irresolute silence settled on the supernumerary table. Appleby stared demurely at his glass. Mummery emitted that noise, as of an emptying bath, which was understood by his colleagues to indicate curiosity and impatience.

'The fact is,' said Bussenschutt cautiously, 'that we have to confess ourselves as still far from clear on – ah – the details of the affair. It would be a kindness – it would gratify what must be now a tolerably harmless curiosity – if you were to offer us, my dear Mr Appleby, an – ah – expository résumé of what must no doubt be called the Eliot Case.'

'Beginning', added Winter more frankly, 'at the beginning and explaining just what it was all about.'

'By all means.' Appleby nodded, looked at Bussenschutt, paused. 'But what', he asked learnedly and with faint malice, 'do we imply by the beginning?'

Bussenschutt chuckled with great geniality. 'We imply the end.'

'Exactly. No beginning could be made on the mystery until one had a notion of what the mysterious incidents were designed to achieve. If not directed to an end they were meaningless, the work – as was not inconceivable – of a lunatic. I dismissed the lunatic and proceeded to distinguish' – unconsciously Appleby's idiom was taking on an academic tinge – 'between possible ends. In the human psyche two conflicting principles govern: the pleasure principle and the reality principle.'

'Such a constataion', interrupted Bussenschutt, 'may be empirically useful. Nevertheless, I would not care-' He checked himself. 'But this is a topic for another occasion.'

'If the pleasure principle were at work the unknown might be attempting to achieve certain immediate gratifications: revenge upon an enemy, a sense of power, the spectacle of humiliation, bewilderment, terror in others. But if the reality principle were at work we should be confronted with something fundamentally different. The incidents would represent a rational and practical plan to cope with an actual environment; the aim would be not immediate pleasure but survival and adaptation.

'My own conclusions on this matter became definite with the affair of the middle black. The reality principle was at work.'

Bussenschutt stirred in his chair. 'But from what I have heard of that incident-'

'Quite so. It was heavy with malice - with a sheer lust to shock and terrify. But it stopped short of the last act of malice, of revenge, of the assertion of power: murder. It was murderous without a murder. The Eliot children were led for some agonizing moments to think that their father had been killed. The pleasure principle was there. Perhaps strongly there. For notice that the incident came after the breakdown of the unknown's first plan; came after Eliot's mysterious rally - when the unknown must have realized that this new demonstration could be of very little use. Substantially it was a malicious fling by the pleasure principle, while the reality principle evolved something else. In the fate of the pig there was a sort of substitutive gratification of the will to murder - as if the

pleasure principle were eager for murder if it could go its own way. But there was no murder; the reality principle was still in final control. There was no murder because murder was *practically* useless. And the joker – as I assured you, Winter – was a *practical* joker. He was after an actual end – after some definite end in the real world – which Eliot's murder would not serve. And here Kermode was the key.

'The career of Kermode – that was the first clue. If Eliot died Kermode was to carry on. So one sees something which Eliot's death would not serve: the disappearance of the Spider. Only if Eliot himself, while still living, said "No more of these books shall appear," would the career of the Spider cease... Not Eliot's death, then – though the unknown might *like* that – but the death of the Spider: that was conceivably the end. And behind the elaborate effort which was being made I felt justified in looking for an *urgent* motive. And – again – a *practical* motive; not an impulse of intellectual snobbery, the desire to get out of a theatrical contract, or anything of the sort.'

'Surely,' said Bussenschutt, 'Kermode himself–'

Appleby nodded. 'I had to keep Kermode in mind. His was a special case. He described himself as waiting on the touch-line; he was eager to take over; and I had overheard him lament the fact that Eliot had rallied from the first onslaught. Kermode wanted *Eliot's* Spider to die, and for a motive which might be reckoned urgent and practical. I completely eliminated him only when the affair entered on its second phase; when the unknown began to operate in a direction which could not benefit Kermode at all.

'But meantime I had this general problem: what urgent and practical motive could there be

for killing the Spider, for stopping Wedge's presses for good and all? The answer was not hard to seek, Those presses were proposing to publish something which the unknown could not afford to see published.'

Appleby paused, aware of a great silence about him, and with a disconcerting feeling that the whole common-room must be listening. But the big table, the middle-sized table and the little table were all deserted; his companions' colleagues had dispersed.

Winter was leaning forward 'The mainspring of the whole plot was fear of something which seemed about to crop up in a book? That is a variation on the motive you imputed to Shoon in your fantasy.'

'Quite so. But Shoon in my fantasy was going to escape from his predicament simply by murdering Eliot. To the unknown, on the contrary, such a cause was useless; the affair of the middle black – the whole elaborate campaign indeed – showed that. From this there was a clear conclusion. The thing which must not be published already existed. Once more, Kermnode was the key. For we know that not only was he to carry on with Spider stories of his own; he was to complete and publish Eliot's unfinished manuscripts. And one such manuscript was known to exist: the novel, *A Death in the Desert*. Eliot had been writing this at the same time as *Murder at Midnight*, but of these two it was only *Murder at Midnight* that the unknown ventured to bring into prominence by monkeying with. Eliot destroyed *Murder at Midnight* when first disturbed by what was happening. But *A Death in the Desert*, with some basic idea in which he was particularly pleased, he preserved and was

resolved – after that mysterious rally to which I shall come – to go on with. Moreover, it was securely in a safe; if Eliot died the thing would go straight to Kermode to complete. Indeed Kermode, who assisted in miscellaneous ways in the Spider concern, may very well have had the gist of it communicated to him by Eliot or Wedge.

‘So you see the point at which we have arrived. Wedge’s presses are waiting – with all that hunger which so amuses Winter – for this new book. But this new book must not appear. Elaborate efforts are therefore made to disgust Eliot with his work, to play upon his nerves so that – in effect – he will cry: “*Stop Press*”. Neither by Kermode nor by himself will any more Spider stuff be printed. To get him to that point was the object, and the unknown’s efforts were, I say, elaborate. They were also subtle. But, being subtle, they were double-edged. The plot failed when it seemed on the very point of success. Eliot went to bed a defeated man, knowing – as he told us – what he must do: and by that he meant, surely, the consigning of the Spider to oblivion. The next morning he had rallied and was proposing to go straight ahead. It was now the unknown who was defeated: he could almost hear, if he was an imaginative man, Wedge’s presses beginning to turn. But, very clearly, he had a second string to his bow.’

Bussenschutt drained his glass and nodded. ‘A process of communication was to be prevented. And a technique which was inapplicable at one end might nevertheless be successfully applied at the other.’

‘Just that. It was no good murdering Mr Eliot. A *Death in the Desert*, with whatever dangerous matter it contained, was safely locked up and in

certain eventualities Kermode would simply carry on. But the person – presuming it to be a single person – to whom the dangerous matter must not come: murder was a possible technique there. When the scene shifted abruptly to the Abbey I had a strong sense that the mystery was entering on this second phase. A murder had been arranged.'

Winter interrupted. 'In fact, x was to be murdered by y; and Eliot, the only known quantity in the affair, was not really concerned. Your knowledge was really in a very odd phase.'

'I had made a fair estimate of what was going forward, but I was in the dark as to the agents. And the first hint that came to me was quite fantastic – a sort of etymological clue. Shoon happened to remark – he was speaking of the man he kept to guard the cellarium – that he had reason to know a good deal about hermits. On that my mind took an involuntary dip into its small store of Greek and I reflected that a hermit is a person who lives in the desert... *A Death in the Desert*. The link became more than merely verbal when I reflected that Shoon in his early days had engaged in a good deal of dubious activity in Arabia and round about.

'Shoon, then, might well be a principal. Perhaps there was something in *A Death in the Desert* which must not get to him. But, equally possibly, it might be Shoon who was determined that this dangerous matter should not get to somebody else – roughly the theory on which I built my rigmarole after the explosion. In other words, Shoon might be either x or y.'

Servants had discreetly cleared the little table, the middle-sized table and the big table; candles were being extinguished; Dr Groper had

disappeared, only the high lights from his orrery gleaming on the wall. Somewhere a clock struck nine.

'x was the jester – now the potential murderer; y was his likely victim. Of the two, y was still wholly shadowy; of x – because x had been active – I knew a good deal more. I must concentrate on x. Who, then, was this unknown who had so strangely taken upon himself the personality of the Spider? What were the evident clues in that problem?'

Appleby paused, as if he were asking more than a rhetorical question. But no one answered.

'Perhaps the observation that Rupert Eliot was the Spider.'

'Was the Spider?' Bussenschutt shook a bewildered head.

'The physical man – the long-limbed sprawling physical man. Perhaps I ought to have reflected that here was a figure who might have been "Spider" from his schooldays. Or, again, there was the matter of the vicar. One of the joker's first tricks was to embarrass the vicar of Rust. Perhaps I ought to have reflected that Rupert had reason to bear a grudge against the clergy; he had got in trouble for robbing a church as a boy.'

Mummery gave an impatient snort. 'These', he said, 'are in themselves nugatory considerations.'

'You are quite right; they might have been most delusive thoughts. And, indeed, there was plainly but one grand path to x; that by way of the prescience, the clairvoyance of the joker. That remained the paramount problem throughout. And – maddeningly – solution after solution had to be turned down.'

'But there was a second prominent problem. Of what sort could that matter in *A Death in the Desert* be which must on no account get to the unknown y? I answered this by saying that Eliot must have put into his novel, wittingly or unwittingly, some incident derived from real life, and of which y must not learn. But that turned out – very strangely – to be almost exactly wrong. In creating that damaging matter Eliot, as I now know, was drawing entirely on fantasy.

'I got nearer the truth when I began to wonder: may these two problems – the problem of the clairvoyance and the problem of the dangerousness of the new novel – be interconnected? Might the truth about one give me the truth about the other?

'But I need not make a long business of telling you how I finally managed to place x and y. There was nothing of high-flown logic about it; it simply came to me after a little thought on what happened while we were inspecting the Collection. The first things we were shown were Eliot's thirty-seven romances. Standing before them, Rupert revealed that he had learnt from Belinda that Shoon sometimes read them. He then went out of his way to make sure that this was so. And Shoon's reply was explicit: he read them every one and was looking forward to the next... So – on a not too risky inference – Rupert was x and Shoon was y.'

Bussenschutt sighed happily. 'Winter, my dear fellow, you were present on this illuminating occasion?'

Winter nodded. 'No doubt, Master, I ought to have seen it. But you must remember that by this time somewhat confusing complications had set in.'

'The confusing complications', said Appleby, 'made – in a negative way – my next task. Rupert was anxious to know if Shoon did really read the novels. That gave the first clear outline of the situation, and I had simply to keep clear of what may be termed the secondary elaboration: the confusing fact that it now seemed to be Rupert who was being threatened. Rupert was the joker – or the original joker.' He paused and smiled at Winter. 'Or again *almost* the original joker. For consider that Rupert had one very strong position: when the first manifestation occurred – I mean the Birdwire burglary – Rupert was in Scotland. That is why Winter here had his vital place in the puzzle. When I got at the truth of the burglary Rupert's grand alibi crumbled. And he had himself told me that upon the news of the Birdwire affair he hurried back to Rust. The burglary, in fact, had given him his idea.

'I added one or two points against him. x had a knowledge of Rust, a knowledge of a certain habit of Archie Eliot's which made the odd little drugging business easy. Rupert fitted well enough. I could see Rupert as priming André in the matter of Miss Cavey's dogs; he had admitted to a long conversation with André on the plans for the night; Belinda and I saw him watching with the grimmest satisfaction André's going off in quest of his stuffed animals. And later I noticed another significant point. It concerned the secondary elaboration – the threatenings of Rupert which began when we got to the Abbey. Rupert really believed that they were Archie's work. And he betrayed at the beginning of our discussing them a conviction that the earlier tricks against Eliot himself were by another hand. One sees now how his mind worked. He himself had originally taken a hint from what he must

have thought of as a piece of mere mischief: the Birdwire burglary. From that he had built up his own strictly practical plot. He now believed Archie to be reversing the process – to be taking a hand in the game out of mere malice. Because of that it was some time before the threats against him really began to work on his nerves. But later he *was* nervous. When I deliberately took up the attitude that the threat against his life was very real I found that he could be soundly rattled. He was aware that he was playing a desperate game against a dangerous man: perhaps Shoon had suspected him, and perhaps it was Shoon who was after him – meaning business.

‘Here I was, then, with almost everything – and with almost nothing. If Rupert, and Rupert alone, was *x*, how had he contrived the business with the Renoir – an affair for which Mrs Moule gave him an alibi? And – far more vital and beguiling – how had he managed to build up something reminiscent of his cousin’s unwritten story, *The Birthday Party*? I was back here with the first grand riddle, that of the clairvoyance. And why should Rupert so fear *A Death in the Desert* getting to Shoon? Here was the second riddle again. And what was Eliot’s position? He had crumpled before the clairvoyance – or before that and the haunting notion he had got from Chown – the notion that some split personality of his own was at work. Why had he rallied on the morning after the Renoir affair? What had he learnt? What was he up to now? And where’ – Appleby looked cautiously around the deserted common-room – ‘was the place of your colleague Benton?’

‘Benton?’ Winter was startled. ‘He has a place – apart from the domestic affair of our Codex?’

'Assuredly. I had from Miss Cavey – who has plenty of wits – the most curious account of a sort of baiting of Benton put up by Shoon. Shoon was becoming uneasy about the Eliots – or about an Eliot; he was inviting Benton to recollect some association with an Eliot. Benton had a place in the equation.'

'And of course Benton' – Bussenschutt amiably smiled at Winter – 'has a secret.'

'The secret', said Appleby, 'of the anatomy of the camel?'

Bussenschutt looked doubtful. 'I have no doubt', he replied guardedly, 'that he may have that secret too.'

'I have never considered whisky', said Bussenschutt as he depressed the lever of a syphon, 'proper to the character of a common-room. And even less am I disposed to sanction those preliminary or pre-prandial potations obscurely known as cocktails. But in one's own fastness' – he gestured round the sombre walls of his study – 'and on an occasion so notable for the diffusion of knowledge–' He reached for the decanter. 'An aposiopesis', he said, 'may well conclude the meaning of what I have to say. And now, my dear Mr Appleby, *camelus saltat*. Which I would translate as the camel is on the jump to be out of the bag.'

'The camel is about to appear. But first let me pause to note where we have arrived and what are the signposts forward.'

'Rupert Eliot, mysteriously checkmated in his attempt to drive his cousin from his books, is proposing as an alternative road to safety the murder of Shoon. This was the murder arranged, and I confess that I was able to look forward to

its possible achievement without much distress of mind. The motivation of the crime was – if only in general terms – intelligible. Shoon is a ruthless and – as Archie Eliot had been told – pertinaciously vengeful man. And in *A Death in the Desert* was something which – somehow – would give Rupert away.

‘Now the problems. There was the increasingly prominent secondary elaboration: the campaign against Rupert. The signposts here, when I came to read them aright, were the literary tastes of Rupert and a question about what happened in Eliot’s *Grand Tarantula*.

‘The next problem was that of Eliot’s rally: that queer peripety which followed upon the affair of the Renoir. Here there proved to be only one signpost, and all it said – if I may keep to my metaphor – was *Proceed via Clairvoyance*.

‘The third problem was that of the mysterious dangerousness of Eliot’s projected novel. And here was the same signpost. *Proceed via Clairvoyance*. Not very helpful you will agree.

‘And then – once more – the final problem of the clairvoyance itself; all along the very heart and citadel of the mystery. How did Rupert manage it? And here, fortunately, there were several signposts: the character of Richard Eliot’s imagination; the conversation of Kermode on artists; an aphorism of Proust’s on art. Of these it was Proust – speaking to me through the lips of Winter – who was most illuminating. Let me put the question. *Where does the Spider come from?*’

There was a little silence – broken by something like a shout from Winter. ‘Patricia!’ he cried. ‘Appleby, your sister asked just that question while we were playing billiards. And

Peter Holme answered out of Wordsworth – not Proust. *From hiding places ten years deep.*'

'Just that. Only the years are nearer fifty. As Mrs Moule acutely remarked, Eliot has something the air of bringing his stuff rather disdainfully out of the nursery cupboard. Such fantasies as Eliot's stories build themselves up out of the buried fantasies of childhood; they are the blood-and-thunder imaginings of children in the first grip of the gangster instinct; they are that with an adult veneer. For that sort of writing, Kermode profoundly remarked to me, one is too old at ten. "Kids," he said. "The secret's in that." And it certainly is.'

'Here', said Bussenschutt approvingly, 'is sound psychology indeed. But when you distinguish between the reality and the pleasure principles—'

'Eliot's tremendous success', Appleby pursued unheeding, 'results from his having an imagination like a cold storage chamber; from his possessing his boyish fantasies in a beautiful state of preservation, but ready to submit, for fictional purposes, to an adult critical control. And what he thought he was inventing he was is often as not remembering. He was remembering the inventions of childhood.'

'The Muses', quoted Winter, 'are the daughters of Memory. No art without recollection.'

'Yes. And in these first inventions Rupert Eliot was a partner. The two boys were brought up together: Richard a day-dreamer merely; Rupert inclined to put lawless fantasies into practice. The stuff of Eliot's stories is drawn from what Miss Cavey is pleased to call a deep well – and Rupert is at the bottom of the well. There too lies the

truth of what Dr Bussenschutt calls the Eliot Case.'

Appleby knocked out his pipe. 'And now you will find that of the tidy-up which I began after the explosion surprisingly little remains to be done. Rupert remembered a fantasy which went by the name of *The Birthday Party*. In a fragmentary way he remembered a good deal; quite enough to score the clairvoyant or prescient effects. But his plan, being subtle, was – I say – double edged. At any time his cousin might hit upon the truth. And that is what happened in the affair of the Renoir. The picture turned up, you remember, in the footman's bed. Eliot rallied hard upon that, declaring that *his* mind could not have evolved what he clearly felt to be a coarse joke, and that therefore no metaphysical quiddities or questions of a split personality were involved. It was specious reasoning and it cloaked the truth. *He had remembered*. He remembered that this was a lewd twist which Rupert had given to some fantasy of theft – the Birthday Party fantasy – long ago. An unsuspected mechanism in the creation of his stories was revealed to him – his Muse was indeed a daughter of Memory. And he saw how, in what had been happening at Rust, Rupert was at work.

'He now knew it was Rupert – that capital fellow, as he liked to think. He knew *how* Rupert contrived it. But he had no notion *why*. It seemed utterly wanton. No wonder that he informed his cousin through Shoon's precious press that he was a nuisance... And Eliot, having a distinctly juvenile and irresponsible strain, hit on a plan for what he called a big mop-up. He resolved to turn the tables on Rupert; to set the Spider, in fact, to

scare him away. This was the secondary complication. He warned Rupert there would be trouble at nine. He hinted he had better take himself off to New Zealand on the ninth of December... And then he planned a really big scare.

'He had noticed that in the Collection Rupert glued himself to the *curiosa* – the indecent books – in a steel bay at one end of the gallery. He rifled the cellarium – he was seen emerging by my sister – and stole a time bomb. He got into a discussion with Shoon over the plot of *Grand Tarantula*, and thus gained renewed access to the Collection: the point in dispute would have to be verified there. He hid the bomb near the letters – which he had come to regard as a good deal more indecent than the *curiosa*. Rupert, he reckoned, could not be much more than deadly scared; he would be safe behind that buttress of steel... And then on the pretext of getting his cousin to a safe refuge, he had him shut up in the Collection shortly before the inspection of the tower. It was all brilliant and crazy enough. In fact it was the author of the thirty-seven romances in his best form. Just consider the rapidity and skill with which he must have worked havoc among the Abbey cars and telephones.

'Rupert, uncertain whether it was Shoon or Archie who was threatening him, still knew that he must get Shoon. He chose the moment when he seemed to have an alibi in the Collection, got to the roof and thence down a fake-ruined wall. He shot at Shoon; I scared him off by a volley of my own in air. And now he really was in some danger – an undesigned danger: he was making his way back to the Collection just on nine o'clock. And in fact the bomb, which was a good

deal more powerful than Eliot doubtless thought, nearly got him... But all this, though distinctly uncomfortable for Rupert – and for a time for his cousin too – was mere embroidery on our main theme.'

Winter sighed. 'And I thought', he said, 'of setting up in the detective line. Lord, lord, *lord*... By the way, what about that Renoir alibi?'

Appleby chuckled. 'At least you have a nose for the loose threads. The answer to that one – and to the nonsense of the clarinet and the blind secretary's stick – is the husband of our dear queen.'

'Is *what*?'

'Another irresponsible Eliot, with an uncertain sense of time. Mrs Timothy in the attics had been Rupert's crony as a boy. They contrived jokes together in the distant past. Only Mrs Timothy is quite unaware that the distant past isn't about her still. She is hearty, suffers from senile masculinism, and thoroughly enjoyed impersonating Rupert and scaring Mrs Moule in the dark... Her importance came to me when, on the way to the Abbey, Timmy inaccurately remarked that all the Eliots were *en route*.'

'It is all over', said Bussenschutt, 'bar the camel.'

Appleby shook his head. 'The camel is perhaps not so very interesting after all – or not from my point of view. The news that Eliot was wandering about the Abbey enquiring about the anatomy of the camel put Rupert in rather a striking stew, and I wondered just what was behind it. But my knowledge of the actual function of the beast is the product of confession – Rupert's eventual

confession – rather than of detection. What is interesting is where I went wrong.

‘I reckoned – not unnaturally – that Eliot, by design or inadvertence, must have put into *A Death in the Desert* something which had really happened within his actual experience. Not a bit of it. He put in a bit of sheer fantasy – what was, though he didn’t know it, one of those buried fantasies of boyhood which he had shared with Rupert. And it was this fantasy which, by an extraordinary paradox, was potentially dangerous to Rupert. For Rupert had once *actually* employed the same fantasy against Shoon. It was his instinct to actualize day-dreams.’

Appleby paused. ‘Dr Bussenschutt,’ he asked solemnly, ‘what does the camel keep in its hump?’

Bussenschutt opened his mouth to speak, checked himself, looked very wary. ‘I have never,’ he pronounced, ‘made the subject a topic of investigation.’

‘It is commonly thought to be water. In point of fact it is chiefly fat. And Richard and Rupert as boys had hit on the weirdest and most unlikely technique for murder. Inject poison into the hump. Your enemy sets out on a desert journey alone; the camel, as it draws on its reserves, slowly absorbs the poison; dies; and there are two deaths in the desert.’

Mummery, whose habit of silence had been strong upon him, burst into laughter. ‘Of all the impossible–’

‘So Eliot believed. He is nervous about his books nowadays and pitches his crimes in the most unlikely places with the most fantastic plots. This plot came into his head – as he

thought for the first time – not long ago. The result was *A Death in the Desert*.

‘But the thing happens to be feasible – *and Rupert nearly brought it off*. Years ago in the East Benton enlisted Rupert’s aid in planning the quiet murder of Shoon: they were all people of that sort. Rupert – who had, I gather, come into slight contact with Shoon already – poisoned the camel. The beast really did die in the desert – and Shoon nearly died too. He must have been left with a puzzled sense that a very extraordinary accident had befallen his beast – with that and a *faint* memory of Rupert having been about at the time. The attempt had failed, but everything was safe enough until the alarming news that Eliot’s new book had the title it had. The affair had been so out-of-the-way that Shoon would only have had to read the story to realize that it was not accident which nearly cost him his life.’

Bussenschutt appeared to be in the unusual condition of struggling for words. ‘Really...one can hardly–’

‘Oh, quite so,’ said Appleby. ‘Quite so. Quite.’

Note on Inspector (later, Sir John) Appleby Series

John Appleby first appears in *Death at the President's Lodging*, by which time he has risen to the rank of Inspector in the police force. A cerebral detective, with ready wit, charm and good manners, he rose from humble origins to being educated at 'St Anthony's College', Oxford, prior to joining the police as an ordinary constable.

Having decided to take early retirement just after World War II, he nonetheless continued his police career at a later stage and is subsequently appointed an Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard, where his crime solving talents are put to good use, despite the lofty administrative position. Final retirement from the police force (as Commissioner and Sir John Appleby) does not, however, diminish Appleby's taste for solving crime and he continues to be active, *Appleby and the Ospreys* marking his final appearance in the late 1980's.

In *Appleby's End* he meets Judith Raven, whom he marries and who has an involvement in many subsequent cases, as does their son Bobby and other members of his family.

Appleby Titles in order of first publication

These titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

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|-----|----------------------------------|------------------------------|------|
| 1. | Death at the President's Lodging | Also as: Seven Suspects | 1936 |
| 2. | Hamlet! Revenge | | 1937 |
| 3. | Lament for a Maker | | 1938 |
| 4. | Stop Press | Also as: The Spider Strikes | 1939 |
| 5. | The Secret Vanguard | | 1940 |
| 6. | Their Came Both Mist and Snow | Also as: A Comedy of Terrors | 1940 |
| 7. | Appleby on Ararat | | 1941 |
| 8. | The Daffodil Affair | | 1942 |
| 9. | The Weight of the Evidence | | 1943 |
| 10. | Appleby's End | | 1945 |
| 11. | A Night of Errors | | 1947 |

12.	Operation Pax	Also as: The Paper Thunderbolt	1951
13.	A Private View	Also as: One Man Show and Murder is an Art	1952
14.	Appleby Talking	Also as: Dead Man's Shoes	1954
15.	Appleby Talks Again		1956
16.	Appleby Plays Chicken	Also as: Death on a Quiet Day	1957
17.	The Long Farewell		1958
18.	Hare Sitting Up		1959
19.	Silence Observed		1961
20.	A Connoisseur's Case	Also as: The Crabtree Affair	1962
21.	The Bloody Wood		1966
22.	Appleby at Allington	Also as: Death by Water	1968
23.	A Family Affair	Also as: Picture of Guilt	1969
24.	Death at the Chase		1970
25.	An Awkward Lie		1971
26.	The Open House		1972
27.	Appleby's Answer		1973
28.	Appleby's Other Story		1974
29.	The Appleby File		1975

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|-----|----------------------------|------|
| 30. | The Gay
Phoenix | 1976 |
| 31. | The Ampersand
Papers | 1978 |
| 32. | Shieks and
Adders | 1982 |
| 33. | Appleby and
Honeybath | 1983 |
| 34. | Carson's
Conspiracy | 1984 |
| 35. | Appleby and
the Ospreys | 1986 |

Honeybath Titles in order of first publication

These titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

- | | |
|------------------------------|------|
| 1. The Mysterious Commission | 1974 |
| 2. Honeybath's Haven | 1977 |
| 3. Lord Mullion's Secret | 1981 |
| 4. Appleby and Honeybath | 1983 |

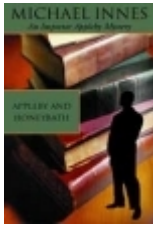
Synopses (Both Series & 'Stand-alone' Titles)

Published by House of Stratus



The Ampersand Papers

While Appleby is strolling along a Cornish beach, he narrowly escapes being struck by a body falling down a cliff. The body is that of Dr Sutch, an archivist, and he has fallen from the North Tower of Treskinnick Castle, home of Lord Ampersand. Two possible motivations present themselves to Appleby – the Ampersand gold, treasure from an Armada galleon; and the Ampersand papers, valuable family documents that have associations with Wordsworth and Shelley.



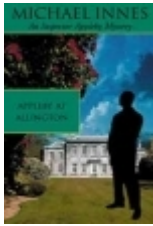
Appleby and Honeybath

Every English mansion has a locked room, and Grinton Hall is no exception – the library has hidden doors and passages...and a corpse. But when the corpse goes missing, Sir John Appleby and Charles Honeybath have an even more perplexing case on their hands – just how did it disappear when the doors and windows were securely locked? A bevy of helpful houseguests offer endless assistance, but the two detectives suspect that they are concealing vital information. Could the treasures on the library shelves be so valuable that someone would murder for them?



Appleby and the Ospreys

Clusters, a great country house, is troubled by bats, as Lord and Lady Osprey complain to their guests, who include first rate detective, Sir John Appleby. In the matter of bats, Appleby is indifferent, but he is soon faced with a real challenge – the murder of Lord Osprey, stabbed with an ornate dagger in the library.



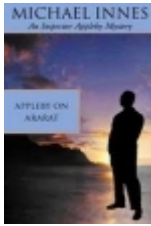
Appleby at Allington

Sir John Appleby dines one evening at Allington Park, the Georgian home of his acquaintance Owain Allington, who is new to the area. His curiosity is aroused when Allington mentions his nephew and heir to the estate, Martin Allington, whose name Appleby recognises. The evening comes to an end but just as Appleby is leaving, they find a dead man – electrocuted in the son et lumière box which had been installed in the grounds.



The Appleby File

There are fifteen stories in this compelling collection, including: Poltergeist – when Appleby's wife tells him that her aunt is experiencing trouble with a Poltergeist, he is amused but dismissive, until he discovers that several priceless artefacts have been smashed as a result; A Question of Confidence – when Bobby Appleby's friend, Brian Button, is caught up in a scandalous murder in Oxford, Bobby's famous detective father is their first port of call; The Ascham – an abandoned car on a narrow lane intrigues Appleby and his wife, but even more intriguing is the medieval castle they stumble upon.



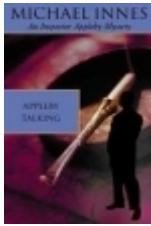
Appleby on Ararat

Inspector Appleby is stranded on a very strange island, with a rather odd bunch of people – too many men, too few women (and one of them too attractive) cause a deal of trouble. But that is nothing compared to later developments, including the body afloat in the water, and the attack by local inhabitants.



Appleby Plays Chicken

David was hiking across Dartmoor, pleased to have escaped the oppressively juvenile and sometimes perilous behaviour of his fellow undergraduates. As far as he could tell, he was the only human being for miles – but it turns out that he was the only living human being for miles. At least, that is what he presumed when he found a dead man on top of the tor.



Appleby Talking

Arbuthnot is paying for a rash decision – he recently married a beautiful but slightly amoral girl whose crazy antics caught his rather cynical professional interest. His wife has taken a lover, Rupert Slade, and Arbuthnot wants nothing more than to see him dead – but the last thing he expected was that he'd walk into his living room and find just that!

Inspector Appleby shares the details of this and many other fascinating crimes in this un-missable collection.



Appleby Talks Again

Ralph Dangerfield, an Edwardian playwright who belonged to the smartest young set of his day, kept a scandalous diary recording the intimate details of his own life and those of his friends. After his death, it was believed that his mother had burnt the incriminating evidence, but fifty years later, a famous collector of literary curiosities claims to have the diary in his possession and threatens to blackmail fashionable London with belated secrets about people now in respectable old age. Sir John Appleby reveals how he uncovered this unscrupulous crime and talks about his key role in seventeen more intriguing cases.



Appleby's Answer

Author of detective novels, Priscilla Pringle, is pleased to find that she is sharing a railway compartment with a gentleman who happens to be reading one of her books – *Murder in the Cathedral*. He is military officer, Captain Bulkington, who recognises Miss Pringle and offers her £500 to collaborate on a detective novel. To everyone's surprise, Miss Pringle is rather taken with Captain Bulkington – is she out of her depth?



Appleby's End

Appleby's End was the name of the station where Detective Inspector John Appleby got off the train from Scotland Yard. But that was not the only coincidence. Everything that happened from then on related back to stories by Ranulph Raven, Victorian novelist – animals were replaced by marble effigies, someone received a tombstone telling him when he would die, and a servant was found buried up to his neck in snow, dead. Why did Ranulph Raven's mysterious descendants make such a point of inviting Appleby to spend the night at their house?



Appleby's Other Story

During a walk to Elvedon House, palatial home of the Tythertons, Sir John Appleby and Chief Constable Colonel Pride are stunned to find a police van and two cars parked outside. Wealthy Maurice Tytherton has been found shot dead, and Appleby is faced with a number of suspects – Alice Tytherton, flirtatious, younger wife of the deceased; Egon Raffaello, disreputable art dealer; and the prodigal son, Mark Tytherton, who has just returned from Argentina. Could the death be linked to the robbery of some paintings several years ago?



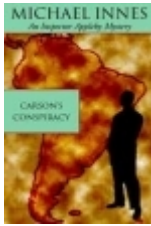
An Awkward Lie

Sir John Appleby's son, Bobby, assumes his father's detective role in this baffling crime. When Bobby finds a dead man, in a bunker on a golf course, he notices something rather strange – the first finger of the man's right hand is missing. A young girl approaches the scene and offers to watch the body while Bobby goes for help, but when he returns with the police in tow, the body and the girl are missing.



The Bloody Wood

An assorted party of guests have gathered at Charne, home of Charles Martineau and his ailing wife, Grace, including Sir John Appleby and his wife, Judith. Appleby's suspicions are soon aroused with the odd behaviour of Charles, and the curious last request of Grace – who desires that upon her death, Charles marries her favourite niece, Martine. When Charles and Grace die on the same day, foul play is suspected.



Carson's Conspiracy

Businessman Carl Carson decides to make a dash for South America to escape the economic slump, leaving his home and his barmy wife. But he has a problem – if his company were seen to be drawing in its horns, it wouldn't last a week. His solution is his wife's favourite delusion – an imaginary son, named Robin. Carson plans to stage a fictitious kidnapping – after all, what could be more natural than a father liquidating his assets to pay the ransom demand? Unfortunately, Carson has a rather astute neighbour – Sir John Appleby, ex-Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.



A Change of Heir

George Gadberry, 'resting actor', packs his bags and heads for obscurity when the Tax Inspector beckons. Then he receives a mysterious invitation and a proposition that could lead to enormous riches. Wealthy imbibor, Nicholas Comberford, wants George to impersonate him in order to secure a place in the will of fabulously affluent Great-Aunt Prudence, who lives in a Cistercian monastery and won't allow a single drop of liquor in the place. Gadberry's luck seems to have changed – but at what cost?



Christmas at Candleshoe

When an American multi-millionaire is keen to buy an Elizabethan manor, she comes up against fierce opposition from a young boy, Jay, and his band of bowmen, who are prepared to defend the manor and its nonagerian owner against all comers. It seems likely that that behind a monumental, seventeenth-century carving, by the hand of Gerard Christmas, lies a hoard of treasure.



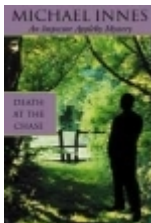
A Connoisseur's Case

When John Appleby's wife, Judith, sets eyes on Scroop House, she insists that they introduce themselves to the owners – a suggestion that makes her sometimes reserved husband turn very pale. When Judith hears the village gossip about the grand house, she is even more intrigued; but when a former employee is found dead in the lock of the disused canal, and the immense wealth of Scroop's contents is revealed, Appleby has a gripping investigation on his hands.



The Daffodil Affair

Inspector Appleby's aunt is most distressed when her horse, Daffodil – a somewhat half-witted animal with exceptional numerical skills – goes missing from her stable I Harrogate. Meanwhile, Hudspith is hot on the trail of Lucy Rideout, an enigmatic young girl has been whisked away to an unknown isle by a mysterious gentleman. And when a house in Bloomsbury, supposedly haunted, also goes missing, the baffled policemen search for a connection. As Appleby and Hudspith trace Daffodil and Lucy, the fragments begin to come together and an extravagant project is uncovered, leading them to South American jungle.



Death at the Chase

When master sleuth, Appleby, leaps over a stile during a country stroll, he is apprehended by an irate Martyn Ashmore, owner of the land on which Appleby has unwittingly trespassed. But when the misunderstanding is cleared up, eccentric, aged Ashmore reveals that he is in fear for his life – once every year, someone attempts to murder him. Is it the French Resistance, or a younger Ashmore on the make? When Martyn dies, Appleby sets out to find who exactly is responsible.



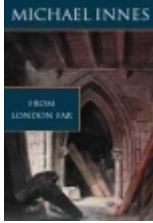
Death At The President's Lodging

Inspector Appleby is called to St Anthony's College, where the President has been murdered in his Lodging. Scandal abounds when it becomes clear that the only people with any motive to murder him are the only people who had the opportunity – because the President's Lodging opens off Orchard Ground, which is locked at night, and only the Fellows of the College have keys...



A Family Affair

Over a period of twenty years, a series of highly elaborate art hoaxes have been perpetrated at carefully time intervals, and in each case, the victim has a very good reason for keeping quiet. Inspector Appleby's interest is kindled by an amusing dinner-party anecdote – when he enlists the help of his wife and son, the ensuing investigation is truly a family affair. The scenes shift swiftly between glorious stately homes and the not-so-glorious art gallery of the irrepressibly dubious Hildebert Braunkopf.



From London Far

As Meredith, an academic, stands in a Bloomsbury tobacconist waiting for his two ounces of tobacco, he murmurs a verse of 'London, a Poem' and is astounded when a trap door opens into the London Catacombs, bringing him face to face with the Horton Venus, by Titian. From then on he is trapped in a maze of the illicit art trade, in the company of the redoubtable Jane Halliwell.



The Gay Phoenix

When tycoon, Charles Povey, is killed in a bizarre boating accident, his corrupt, look-alike brother, Arthur, adopts his identity and his financial empire. But the charade becomes complicated when one of Charles's many mistresses sees through the guise and blackmails Arthur. Enter retired detective, Sir John Appleby...



Going it Alone

Gilbert Averell avoids some of the rigours of taxation by living for part of each year in France – but he is unhappy about the number of weeks he spends away from his native country. So when his look-alike friend, Georges, suggests that they swap passports for a short spell, Gilbert seizes the opportunity. However, a number of incidents, involving Gilbert's sister and nephew, begin to suggest that Georges's offer was not made out of simple friendship.



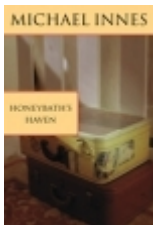
Hamlet, Revenge!

At Seamnum Court, seat of the Duke of Horton, The Lord Chancellor of England is murdered at the climax of a private presentation of Hamlet, in which he plays Polonius. Inspector Appleby pursues some of the most famous names in the country, unearthing dreadful suspicion.



Hare Sitting Up

When a germ-warfare expert goes missing, his twin brother impersonates him as a cover-up, but for how long can this last? Inspector Appleby is sent on a series of wild goose chases, which take him to a preparatory school, to the estate of an eccentric earl, and to a remote Atlantic rock, before a truly shocking climax.



Honeybath's Haven

When portrait-painter and occasional detective, Charles Honeybath, pays a visit to his old friend Edwin Lightfoot, there are a few surprises in store. Edwin's irksome wife is packing her bags, while Edwin is indulging in an eccentric game of pretence – acting the part of a long-dead petty criminal named Flannel Foot. Days later, when Edwin disappears, Honeybath finds himself with a mystery to solve and some decisions to make about his life – will he be lured by his intended haven?



The Journeying Boy

Humphrey Paxton, the son of one of Britain's leading atomic boffins, has taken to carrying a shotgun to 'shoot plotters and blackmailers and spies'. His new tutor, the plodding Mr Thewless, suggests that Humphrey might be overdoing it somewhat. But when a man is found shot dead at a cinema, Mr Thewless is plunged into a nightmare world of lies, kidnapping and murder – and grave matters of national security.



Lament for a Maker

When mad recluse, Ranald Guthrie, the laird of Erchany, falls from the ramparts of his castle on a wild winter night, Appleby discovers the doom that shrouded his life, and the grim legends of the bleak and nameless hamlets, in a tale that emanates sheer terror and suspense.



The Long Farewell

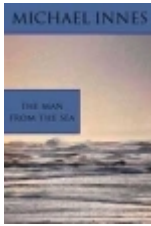
Lewis Packford, the great Shakespearean scholar, was thought to have discovered a book annotated by the Bard – but there is no trace of this valuable object when Packford apparently commits suicide. Sir John Appleby finds a mixed bag of suspects at the dead man's house, who might all have a good motive for murder. The scholars and bibliophiles who were present might have been tempted by the precious document in Packford's possession. And Appleby discovers that Packford had two secret marriages, and that both of these women were at the house at the time of his death.



Lord Mullion's Secret

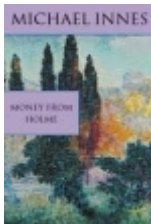
At Mullion Castle, sumptuous stately home, we meet the Earl and his family, who include his delightful daughters, Patty and Boosie, and dotty Great-aunt Camilla.

Old school chum, Charles Honeybath, who has been commissioned to paint a portrait of the Earl's wife, finds himself at the helm of a complex investigation involving ancestral works of art and a young under gardener, Swithin, who seems to possess the family features somewhat strikingly ...



The Man From The Sea

When a man swims to shore from a freighter off the Scottish coast, he interrupts a midnight rendezvous between Richard Cranston and Lady Blair. Richard sees an obscure opportunity to regain his honour with the Blair family after he hears the swimmer's incredible tale of espionage, treason and looming death. But this mysterious man is not all he seems, and Richard is propelled into life threatening danger.



Money From Holme

Sebastian Holme was a painter who, as the exhibition catalogue recorded, had met a tragic death during a foreign revolution. Art dealer, Braunkopf, has made a small fortune from the exhibition. Unfortunately, Holme turns up at the private view in this fascinating mystery of the art world in which Mervyn Cheel, distinguished critic and pointillist painter, lands in very hot water.



The Mysterious Commission

Portrait painter, Charles Honeybath, is intrigued when he is visited by a mysterious Mr Peach and is commissioned to paint an anonymous, aristocratic sitter, known only as 'Mr X', whom relatives claim is insane. Under cover of night, Honeybath is taken to the house and asked to stay while he completes his work; but when he returns to his studio, he discovers that the bank next door has been robbed and that he is under suspicion!



The New Sonia Wayward

Colonel Ffolliot Petticate's predicament begins when his novelist wife, Sonia, drowns during a sailing trip in the English Channel. A dramatic cover-up ensues in a tale full of humour, irony and devastating suspense.



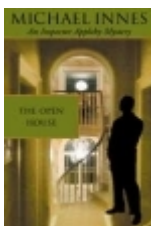
A Night of Errors

A gruelling night of shrouded motives and confused identities develops when the last of the Dromios is found murdered, with both of his hands burnt off. He was one of triplets, whose brothers had died in a fire forty years previously. Inspector Appleby wrenches the facts from a melodrama in which the final solution is written in fire.



Old Hall, New Hall

The forbears of Sir John Jory, of New Hall, would seem to have committed several foul acts, including tomb-robbery and murder. Old Hall, the family's former residence, is now a University. Biographer Colin Clout, engaged to write an account of one of Jory's ancestors, gets caught up in a frenzied treasure hunt as rival interests and rival claimants probe the past and naked greed comes to the fore.



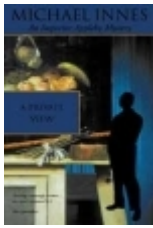
The Open House

When Inspector Appleby's car breaks down on a deserted road one dark night, he happens upon an imposing mansion, whose windows are all illuminated. His sense of curiosity gets the better of him when he discovers that the front door is wide open, and he gets a funny feeling of being watched as he wanders round this splendid house, looking for signs of life. When he finds an elaborate feast laid out, he wonders who is expected...



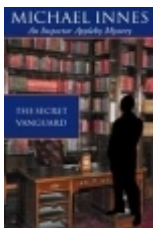
Operation Pax

A two-bit con-man is thrown in at the deep end as a desperate hunt takes place in Oxford, in this gripping tale whose thrilling climax takes place in the vaults of the Bodleian.



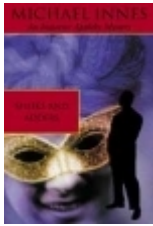
A Private View

Sir John and Lady Appleby attend a memorial exhibition of the oils, gouaches, collages and trouvailles of artist Gavin Limbert, who was recently found shot, under very suspicious circumstances. As Assistant Commissioner of Police, Sir John is already interested, but he becomes even more intrigued when Limbert's last masterpiece is stolen from the gallery under his very eyes.



The Secret Vanguard

Successful minor poet, Philip Ploss, lives a peaceful existence in ideal surroundings, until his life is upset when he hears verses erroneously quoted as his own. Soon afterwards, he is found dead in the library with a copy of Dante's Purgatory open before him.



Sheiks and Adders

When half of the guests at a charity masquerade fête at Drool Court turn up dressed as sheiks, it must be more than pure coincidence. One of them is the real thing, however, and Sir John Appleby, master detective, discovers that he is in grave danger. When one of the pseudo-sheiks is murdered, Appleby finds himself in the midst of an international political crisis.



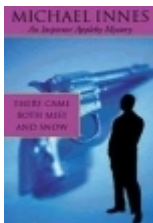
Silence Observed

Respected Fine Art experts are deceived in one of the most intriguing murder cases Inspector Appleby has ever faced, beginning with Gribble, a collector of forgeries whose latest acquisition is found to be a forged forgery! In the words of Appleby himself: 'Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. Just a little mad, for a start. Inclined, say, to unreasonable jokes in the course of business. But later – well, very mad indeed.'



Stop Press

Famous writer, Richard Eliot, has written numerous detective novels, featuring 'The Spider', a daring, clever criminal in earlier books, and an equally canny private investigator in later ones. But when he comes to life – first to burgle an odd neighbour, then to harass the Eliot family, and finally to attend his own 'birthday party' – Inspector John Appleby is sent to investigate.



There Came Both Mist and Snow

Stunning Belrive Priory, consisting of a mansion, park and medieval ruins, is surrounded by the noise and neon signs of its gaudy neighbours – a cotton-mill, a brewer and a main road.

Nevertheless, Arthur Ferryman is pleased to return for a family Christmas, but is shocked to discover that his cousins have taken up a new pastime – pistol-shooting. Inspector Appleby arrives on the scene when one of Ferryman's cousins is found shot dead in the study, in a mystery built on family antagonisms.



The Weight of the Evidence

Meteorites fall from the sky but seldom onto the heads of science dons in redbrick universities; yet this is what happens to Professor Pluckrose of Nestfield University. Inspector Appleby soon discovers that the meteorite was not fresh and that the professor's deckchair had been placed underneath a large, accessible tower – he already knew something of academic jealousies but he was to find out a great deal more.



What Happened at Hazlewood

The Simney family, of Hazlewood Hall, have a dubious history. Sir George Simney, who was travelling in Australia before the baronetcy fell to him, sleeps with a shotgun by his side. When he is found dead in the library, the Reverend Adrian Deamer will not rest until he has discovered who is responsible. This is an absorbing tale narrated by Simney's widow, Nicolette, and by young Harold, who has just joined the C.I.D.

